MY THREE WEEKS IN NORMANDY – One Veteran's Story

by Clyde E. Phelps 90th ID/358th/Company C

June 12 - July 4, 1944

Prelude:

I did not sleep well the night of June 5/6, 1944. Intermittently, I tossed and turned on my Army cot to the sound of seemingly thousands of airplane engines throbbing overhead. In the morning, groggy from lack of sleep, I, along with several thousand companions stationed as U.S. Army infantry replacements in a "tent city" in the heathered hills (moors) of northern Devonshire, England, were assembled and told that the long-expected invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europe" had begun! Paratroops and glider troops had been dropped in the early hours of the day, and even as we listened, beach landings were taking place in a combined allied (U.S. British, some Free French) operation on the Cotentin Peninsula in the ancient French province of Normandy. We were also informed that we were now on official alert and should be prepared to move out at anytime.

Thus began my involvement - the small part I was to play - in the great "D-Day" invasion which Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower had described a short time before in a radio broadcast directed at ..."the people of western Europe" as the beginning of the crusade of their liberation from four years of German (Nazi) tyranny!

In many ways up to that point, my military experience was typical of several million other young American males at the time. Drafted (conscripted) a, few months after high school graduation and my 18th birthday into the U.S. armed forces - in my case, the U.S. Army - for "the duration plus six months." However, unlike most, I had been assigned to a wartime training camp (Camp Fannin, Texas) for infantry basic training. The camp was one of a number designated as "IRTCs" - Infantry Replacement Training Centers. As the U.S. got more deeply involved in ground fighting (this was the autumn of 1943) in its two-front war, the selective service system was called *on* increasingly to supply infantry replacements for the growing casualties in that branch of the service.

After 17 weeks of intensive training - much of it like that experienced to this day in Marine Corps "boot camp" - and a short furlough, my orders directed me to the U.S. East Coast (Fort Meade, Md.), and then a port of embarkation (Staten Island, New York Harbor). After boarding a troop transport on a pier in Staten Island, there was an 11-day trip (average speed about 10 mph) in a heavily guarded convoy across the North Atlantic to the British Isles - more precisely, to the Scottish port of Greenock. west of Glasgow. Presently, there followed an all-day troop train ride to South-West England and the aforementioned tent city in Devon (Haddon Hill). There were then about eight weeks of training and waiting in that isolated (no passes - no leaves) camp before the alert on 0-Day.

On the morning of June 8th, we packed our gear (duffel bags) and with our zeroed in new M-1 rifles (we were all riflemen) left the camp and boarded trucks for the start of our journey. The truck ride was short, not more than 10 miles to a rail line. There we boarded first class British passenger railway carriages. Then, it was a fairly long ride of some hours to the battered southern English port city of Plymouth. Much of the ride was along the south-western English coast and it was interesting to observe all the coastal defenses the British had erected when threatened with invasion in 1940-41.

At Plymouth (located right by its inner harbor) we were processed through a center used less than a week before by some of the invasion forces: Issuance of impregnated fatigues to wear over our OD (Olive Drab) uniforms, gas capes (there was fear that Hitler, in desperation, might order use of poisoned gas against invasion forces), plus bandoleers of live ammunition and canned heat (for cooking rations).

We also got our last hot meals and the issuance of "K" and "ID" rations for subsequent use. Those condensed rations were all the official rations we were issued during the time I was in Normandy.

We spent about three days in the camp in Plymouth, sealed off from any contact with the civilian world. The only news we got were daily issues of the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes. From reading it, I got the impression that we were making rapid progress in consolidating the beachheads in Normandy. A note here, 'alike troops in later U.S. wars, we were literally searched to make sure we carried no hidden diaries or cameras. Our mail had been censored from the time we arrived in the British Isles.

On June 11th we were ferried in U.S. Navy LCVP landing craft, out to a British transport anchored in the harbor. I suppose it could be described as an attack transport. It had a Royal Navy crew for its guns and handling of landing craft, and Merchant Navy (our Merchant Marine) civilians to run the ship. Instead of lifeboats it carried British landing craft on the davits. These landing craft were relatively small and lightweight (made mostly of plywood) and could carry about 25 men each. We vent aboard - the same way we left - via a cargo net over the side.

June 12th

As we came on deck on the morning after leaving Plymouth, we found a sparkling bright day, and that we were anchored about a quarter of mile off of (we were told) "Utah Beach." The following impressions are still with me of that morning: The beach and area around us were swarming with activity. It couldn't have changed much from D-Day, only six days earlier. There were a number of cargo ships to be seen discharging cargo (ammo and rations) over the side in cargo nets into waiting amphibious trucks (designated Dukws who took it (their cargo) ashore and up onto the beach for transfer to regular trucks. Three or hundred yards away on one side.

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inch guns on fire support targets inland. It occurred to me, that the bridgehead beyond the beaches was not as deep as the Stars and Stripes had suggested' Utah Beach itself appeared as a strip of yellow-white sand with a low sand dune barrier. Beyond was a low-lying countryside with no dwellings visible. Unlike nearby Omaha Beach, there were no coastal bluffs. Above some of the ships and part of the beach waved barrage balloons.

During the morning of the 12th, we were issued two interesting items:

1) An English-French booklet containing a lot of basic phrases that would supposedly come in handy in our contact with French civilians. It contained both actual and phonetic spelling of words. However, for someone like me with no formal French instruction, it wasn't really very helpful. Correct and understandable French pronunciation is very difficult, for English speakers. But it was certainly better than nothing.

2) We were also issued 200 Francs each of invasion currency in denomination of one five and twenty Francs. Each Franc was officially worth two cents.

We spent much of the rest of the day lounging around on deck, talking and with some crap shooting and poker playing with the new currency. For awhile also, we were frightened by a typical "latrine rumor" which swept the ship that we were going to be part of a new landing somewhere. I guess the live ammo we had been issued fueled it. Of course, as we were only replacements and not yet even part of an organized outfit, logic finally prevailed, and we calmed down somewhat.

June 13th -

The next day (June 13th) turned out to be a hectic one. In the morning, we were ordered to leave our duffel bags behind, but still burdened with packs, life jackets, gas masks and rifles we descended cargo nets over the transport's sides into the landing craft which had been lowered into the water. A dangerous moment occurred as my group got into its landing craft. Because of the heavy swell, an unhooked davit (basically a heavy block and tackle) swung in an are from one end of the craft to the other. This had the potential of injuring and even killing a number of us. Most of us "hit the deck," and fortunately it missed us. After several swings, it was pulled up and away from us by deck crewmen.

Our landing craft was powered by an engine in the stern, and steered by a one-man crew, a coxswain of the Royal Navy. My mood could be described as being curious about the drama taking place around me, but not really being eager to get directly involved. Therefore, I stood by the coxswain in the stem. About 50 yards from the beach, we suddenly stopped. Thinking this was it, a number of my companions jumped into the water which was about waist to chest high, and begin wading ashore. The coxswain told me it was just a sandbar and not to jump in. He easily backed the craft off the sandbar and ran its prow up on the beach passing the men struggling in the water in the process stepped ashore without so much as getting my boots wet!

Now I could take in part of the beach activity only seen previously from a distance. Both men and amphibious trucks were being directed by members of a specialized Army engineering unit with large and colorful identifying unit patches on their sleeves. Some of them had been the first ashore to mark the beach and guide the first waves in. There only order to us was clear the beach and move inland.

We walked through one of several breaks bulldozed through the barrier dune, which were, in effect, the roads off the beach. I noticed several wrecked German pillboxes which had been built into one barrier dune. I also noticed a small, miniature tank laying on its side. I had previously read about this device, although I can't recall what it was called (Goliath). It was radio controlled and contained about 1,000 pounds of TNT. Fortunately, in this case it hadn't exploded. Just beyond the barrier dune was an enemy mine field about 50 to 100 feet wide. It was marked with death-head "Achtung Minen" signs. Of course, a wide path (a road now) had been marked and cleared through it probably by Army combat engineers. This connected up with a paved road of the local French system, and we were told to just keep marching inland with more specific instructions promised for later.

It was another bright and sunny day, and once off the beach, very peaceful and quiet. We marched casually at "route step" with intervals of ten feet or so between men on each side of the road so motorized traffic could move in between. Sharing the road with us were members of the veteran 9th Division who were also coming ashore. All we knew was that we were replacements for some Infantry division which one was still classified information to us. A rumor spread that it was the nine...something. The 9th Division guys told us maybe it was them, and that we would be lucky if it was because they were a good outfit (which they were). Of course, they hadn't had any casualties yet in Normandy, and therefore they didn't need any replacements yet so it wasn't them.

A few hundred yards in from the beach, I met my first French civilian. He was a boy of about fifteen or sixteen pushing his bicycle. I greeted him with about the only French words I knew at the time - "Bon Jour." His friendly response was interesting - "Sprechen Zie Deutsch"? He obviously knew no English but had picked up a fair amount of German from his occupiers!

We seemed to be marching pretty much in a western direction. After covering a few miles we entered our first French village. For a long time, I thought it was the famous Sainte-Mere-Eglise, but realize now it was probably Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. It appeared undamaged to me but few civilians were about. One lasting impression of this village - at its center stood a road side public pump similar to what were still common on U.S. farms in my childhood. We filled our canteens but were careful to add the prescribed number of water purification tablets.

So far, we hadn't heard a shot fired in anger or otherwise. However, a mile or so beyond the village, we had a reminder of the nearby war. As we passed a crossroads, we heard several shots that obviously did not come from U.S. weapons. A nearby MP told us that there had been instances of local French women sniping at our forces.

At the time, I had been so indoctrinated about all French hating all Germans, etc. that I found this hard to believe. But such instances were verified and are noted in the official U.S. Army history of the Normandy campaign. After all, the Germans had been in occupation of this part of France for four years. It was a rich farming area and could feed both occupiers and occupied. Also, most Frenchmen of military age had been and still were POWs in Germany.

Our propaganda had also made most of us believe that we would literally be met at the beach by French Forces of the Interior (FFI) underground fighters. Of course, for good reasons, they weren't there, but that didn't mean they didn't exist. I never encountered any of them out in the open in Normandy, but our forces met and worked with a. lot of them later on after the breakout, especially in Brittany and beyond.

By late afternoon we had probably covered eight to ten miles. The word was passed down to turn off the road and into nearby fields for the night. As dusk fell (about ten p.m. - we were on double British Summer Time, two hours ahead of regular) trucks drove into our field. They contained our duffel bags from the transport. We were given fifteen or twenty minutes to go through the contents of our bags.

I removed a few personal effects from mine. The bags were then returned to the trucks which drove off. (Note - I never saw my duffel bag again. although shortly after my Army discharge after the war, all personal effects I had left in were returned), In the gathering darkness I bedded down into a fortunately dry ditch in front of a hedgerow and was soon asleep. It had been a long day!

A few hours later I awoke with a start to the sights and sounds of a German bombing raid on Utah Beach. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was an attempted bombing raid as I heard no bombs actually explode. A German recon plane (probably a light bomber) was flying lazily overhead with much AA fire from the beach area trying to bring it down, without success. It wound up dropping several parachute flares and then droned away into the night. The engines of the German plane (just like other weapons) had a different sound than ours. They sort of sounded like a couple of ushers were loose in them. Why, I never really found out.

June 14th:

The next morning (June 14th) we awoke to the sound of trucks again turning into the field. These turned out to be from the 90th Infantry Division (at last we found out) come to carry us to our assigned regiments within the Division. After a short ride, we found ourselves at the Headquarters of the 358th Infantry Regiment. All around us were men wearing an unfamiliar (to us) shoulder patch emblazoned with the letter T crossing the letter 0 in red. The TO stood for Texas/Oklahoma as the 90th was originally made up of National Guard units from those states (the division later acquired the nickname "Tough [1]0mbres": While we waited, a lanky SFC from Oklahoma gave us an impromptu lecture about what the division had learned about German battle tactics in the hedgerow fighting they had been engaged in for less than a week.

(Note - Although part of the 90th landed with the 4th Division at Utah Beach on D-Day, the first combat assignment for the division as a whole had come three or four days later). He warned us that the enemy would always try to pin you down with sniper and machine gun fire, and then, if successful, zero in mortar and/or artillery fire (88's) on you. So, the lesson was, if at all possible, keep moving.

About this time, I saw my first dead German. The corpse lay at the foot of a tree from which he had been (when alive) sniping at us. Apparently, he had been armed with a "Burp" gun as 9mm ammo was scattered on the ground. This was actually the first dead person I had ever seen, and, of course, it wasn't "prettied up" by an undertaker!

Other than the sergeant's remarks, there was no formal orientation. Actually, this whole replacement exercise was just a short interlude in the division's attempt to carry out its assigned combat mission. We soon found ourselves "penny packaged" throughout the regiment's rifle companies. This was done on foot and alphabetically. Thus, I found myself along with several of my friends whose last name began with "P" assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 358th Infantry. I only remember two friends. One was Dan Phillips a full-blooded Creek Indian from Oklahoma. The other was a fellow from Arkansas named Pierce who looked like and talked like a young Bill Clinton. Phillips was perhaps my best friend in the replacement battalion, most of whom were from Oklahoma and Arkansas.

C Company turned out to be badly in need of replacements. Heavily casualties in its first days of combat had reduced its number of riflemen to about forty - the same number a platoon has at full strength. We soon found ourselves having our first conversations with some of these forty veterans who looked like they had been in combat for several months instead of less than a week. From them, we learned of the weak leadership of the division's then commanding general, and some of the other problems encountered by most units in their first actual combat. We were told how the regiment had been ordered or blundered into advancing into a swamp. (Note - the Germans as an invasion precaution had previously flooded the land around every stream, they possibly could). They had eventually fought their way through to higher ground and captured their main objective - a small town (Pont l'Abbé) only to be bombed by American planes. Unfortunately, they had lost all their identifying-colored smoke grenades and cloth markers which were to be used to prevent this from happening!

The word soon came down for the Company to move. Our apprehensions were not helped any when we shortly passed through an area where our artillery had previously caught a German column moving down a country lane. Battered enemy dead and equipment were everywhere. I recall one dead German with the top of his head blown off. Shell fragments had also blown open his back pack with shaving gear, etc. scattered about. Another dead German was standing waist high in a foxhole (part of them must have been dug in) with his "burp" gun (9mm Schmeiser Machine Pistol) still clutched in his hands. Someone went for the weapon only to be warned off about booby trapped enemy equipment. It was all like out of a Hollywood war movie, only it was for real!

For the rest of the day and into the night we moved against, fortunately, light enemy resistance. There was some sniping and lots of noise from more distant enemy fire with occasional shell bursts of unknown origin. At this time, "marching fire" (i.e. laying down small arms fire on any suspicious target) was still against orders. We were instructed to fire only at "seen targets." However, we begin to react to the sniper fire like the veterans, shooting into the tops of tall trees and other likely targets, with uncertain results.

With regard to the subject of snipers, it was on this first day with the Division that I heard for the first time the rumor that the Germans had some Japanese snipers in their units. Unlike many rumors, it turned out to have some basis in fact. Many prisoners from the Soviet Union, captured on the Eastern

Front, had been drafted (Or volunteered) into German army units serving in Normandy. Some of these were Mongolians who had been killed or captured as snipers, hence the rumor.

It was pitch dark before we finally were told to stop and dig in. What we could make out told us that we were in an area that had previously been fought over. The few buildings we could make out were damaged, and we stumbled over small limbs shot off trees and also felt various wires underfoot. Some of this was enemy communications wire. If identified (it was red) it was cut. Digging in meant going into a field by a hedge- row and digging a slit trench the size of your body with your entrenching tool. The depth of the trench depended on the situation. If enemy fire, with the strong likelihood of more to come, was falling in your immediate vicinity, you were motivated, no matter how fatigued, to dig in deeper. On this first night in combat, other than the eerie surroundings and scary sounds, there was no direct fire in our area so our holes were shallow (a foot to a foot and a half deep). We were ordered, that was always the order in such circumstances, to take hour on-hour off turns sleeping and sentry duty. But most of us soon fell into an exhausted sleep.

June 15 – 19:

I awoke a few ours later in the half-light of the dawn of what was to become another sunny day. One of the first things I saw were the bloated bodies of two 82nd Airborne Division troopers. One had been partially buried by his buddies. They were easy to identify by their jump jackets, boots and shoulder patches (one, their unit insignia, the other, a small American flag). There was also a wrecked glider in a nearby field but no visible bodies. As part of their anti-invasion preparations, the Germans had emplaced poles (stripped, medium sized trees) spaced so that a glider had virtually no chance of landing in the small hedgerow bordered fields without hitting them.

After individual K ration breakfasts, the word was passed down to move out. For the next several days approximately June 15 - 19), our operations fell into a pattern of move, stop and wait, with companies within the Battalion leapfrogging each other and taking turns on "the point" as we followed a retreating enemy. I always knew when Company C was at or near the tail end of the operation when I saw the Battalion's 57mm anti-tank guns being pulled by. As any infantry veteran can tell you, in these and similar operations, you know nothing of any overall plan, and see and participate in nothing beyond that of your immediate squad or sometimes platoon. Yours, and other units are, of course, spread out to cut the chances of heavy casualties.

About this time, we learned that the 9th Division, moving directly west, had reached the other side of the Cherbourg or Cotentin Peninsula, cutting off any escape south for the German units opposing us. Hence, these units were rapidly retreating north toward the port of Cherbourg and its surrounding fortifications. Of course, their rear guards continued to fight our advance, inflicting casualties on us in the process.

For example, I recall running across a small-field and being aware of being shot at by a nearby sniper. When I got to the other side, the soldier who was nearest to me was lying in the middle of the field with a bullet in his leg. Another incident - at dusk on the 15th or 16th, our platoon was on point in a wide skirmishers' formation. As we came to an apple orchard, several soldiers shouted excitedly that they could see enemy soldiers running through the part of the orchard nearest to us and began shooting at them. I peered over the hedgerow into the orchard but could see nothing. Suddenly, heard the rip-like sound of an enemy light machine gun being fired. At the same moment it appeared that tracer bullets were going right through by legs and thighs. When they stopped, I did an "Olympic high jump" over the hedgerow into the ditch on the other side. There was no repetition of the machine gun fire, and I wasn't

even scratched. However, our platoon guide on sergeant wasn't so lucky. He was lying on the ground right next to where I had been, with numerous bullet wounds in his legs. He never made a sound and after first aid was moved to the rear. Our platoon commander (a 2nd Lieutenant and like me a replacement) came running over berating all of us for not watching our flanks. This had allowed the enemy to lay their machine gun on top of the hedgerow at the corner of the field and fire straight down it. We were fortunate there were not more casualties.

Other impressions - Advancing across a fairly wide field (for a change) and going by a frightened young German prisoner in camouflaged helmet and jacket being led to the rear. About the same time, a nearby airburst from what appeared to be a 75mm or 105mm shell. Just one burst, whether ours or theirs you couldn't tell. Stepping on a frightened rabbit, in a field and having it run off in front of me. The man next to me (it was Pierce) reacted as if the rabbit was some kind of "Bouncing petty" anti-personnel mine and hit the ground. Advancing out onto and advancing down a paved road in the moonlight until we noticed that the asphalt had neat little circles in patterns the size of German antitank mines. We got off that road as gingerly and fast as we dared!

About this time, I had my first experience of being present when a fellow soldier carried out a self-inflicted wound. It was early in the morning as we were preparing to move out. I had noticed when walking by a soldier still in his shallow foxhole, that he was fiddling with his rifle in a vaguely strange manner. Suddenly a shot rang out followed by a piercing scream. The man had shot himself through the fleshy part of one leg (his calf). I didn't really realize what had happened until a medical officer ran up cursing him (We must have been near the Battalion Aid Station). They moved him out of there in a hurry.

I believe that this was the same day we advanced through areas that had been heavily plastered by propaganda surrender leaflets put together by a Psychological Warfare unit and dropped by U.S. medium bombers (B-26's). Mirroring the ethnic composition of the retreating enemy, these leaflets were printed in German, Polish, and Russian. In all three languages they promised that they could be used as safe conduct passes with good treatment accorded the bearer. They were signed by General Eisenhower.

The next morning, I witnessed one response to this effort. Just as we had begun our advance into territory enemy held the night before, the word came to stop. As we lay alongside a hedgerow, a request came for a Polish speaking soldier in the Company to come to the head of the column. A few minutes later, he accompanied what appeared to be a German soldier clutching one of the leaflets, informing everyone within hearing over and over, "Nix Deutsch, me Polski."

Another time, I recall we being stopped for some reason around a single French farm house. The occupants, including a young woman, came out and talked to us. She was not overly attractive but was the first woman of any kind I had seen since leaving England. I should say that we tried to talk to her. The only one successful was a replacement in the Company I had not met before. He was a member of the famous French banking family, the House of Rothschild. Being Jewish, they had fled France when it fell to the Germans in 1940. He later became the French interpreter for the Company Commander.

I also recall digging up the pea patch part of this particular farm's garden and pretty much wrecking it before being ordered to move on. Of course, this wasn't deliberately malicious. I was just learning, like the veterans to dig in whenever we stopped.

Once, when our advance stopped for several hours, I recall digging a shallow hole in a bushy part of a hedgerow and being by myself for a change. I took out the New Testament carried in the breast pocket of my fatigue jacket. I re-read the introductory statement by our then Commander-in-Chief President Franklin D. Roosevelt, recommending Scripture reading. I hadn't been doing that lately. I then

read several chapters sort of conducting my own church service. It reminded me of that saying (some would say cliche) we used to hear all during World War TT that there "were no Atheists in foxholes. I would add in passing, that we never had an organized church service during my three weeks in Normandy.

Around the 19th of June, our advance was ordered to halt on a fairly high ridge, overlooking a wide valley to the north. We had probably advanced about ten miles in a north - north-east direction since I had joined the Division. For once we could see above the restricting hedgerows. A few miles in the distance was a medium sized town that was probably Montebourg but perhaps Valognes. We were about fifteen miles south of Cherbourg, and perhaps equidistance from Utah Beach to the east. We dug in around the buildings of a dairy large farm. The longer we stayed there, the deeper the veterans dug. One of them, near me, even dug his hole deep into the clay soil and then cut back a shelf the size of his body into the overhead. He had been mortared: I emulated him, except for the shelf part. After digging down about five feet, I covered one end with small logs and turf. I was learning. Fortunately, the only shell fire we got in that position was several short rounds from our own artillery, but no one was hurt.

We were told that the newly landed 79th Division was to pass through our positions and advance toward Cherbourg in place of us. It was the "Cross of Lorraine" outfit, in its first combat action. I again had a little contact with civilians. This time an attempted conversation with two teenagers (one male, the other female) from the farm.

This time the needed interpreter was a soldier from New England of French-Canadian descent.

Another contact turned out worse but didn't require any French language expertise. A friendly farmer at the aforementioned farm offered me a canteen full of warm fresh milk as I observed him milking. Having had no fresh milk since leaving the U.S., I foolishly accepted. The fact that he rinsed out his milk pail with cold water stirred with a branch from a nearby bush should have alerted me to what was to come. The land of Louis Pasteur still pasteurized only its wine - not its milk! The Normans didn't drink fresh milk or cream. They used it to make cheese and butter. The next several days I was very sick with vomiting and diarrhea. Unless you ran a temperature of at least 102°F you weren't officially considered to be sick. The medics at the Battalion Aid Station gave me some bismuth or paregoric pills which helped a little but not much. It just had to run its course.

Things weren't too serious the first day as we weren't really doing anything.

However, the second evening (it was the 21st or 22nd), we were suddenly ordered to get our gear together and prepare to move out. The 79th having completed its move through the 90th positions, the latter had been ordered to make a forced night march from the north to the south end of our corps positions, a distance of about 15 miles. We moved out at dusk. My vomiting and diarrhea had stopped but I was still very weak. For most of the way we marched down a major north-south two-lane highway. It was on the same order as we had moved in from the beach - extended order, columns on each side of the road with the motorized traffic going down the middle, except, now, of course, we were assigned to specific units within the Division. Strict silence, no smoking, and no rest breaks were observed as part of the route lay under enemy observation.

I was able to stay in formation and keep up with the others until we had crossed the long causeway near Pont l'Abbé. Then, I begin to fall further and further behind.

A sympathetic medic let me ride on the trailer of his jeep. As the jeep was traveling faster than the marching men, I began to catch up with the Company. This went on for several miles, when a doctor observed me riding for the first time, probably because dawn was now breaking. Thinking me just another "goldbrick" he rejected my explanation and curtly ordered me to get off. It turned cut to be a minor miracle as just then

the rapid march pace slowed down as our destination was being reached, and I found myself exactly where I wanted to be, right in the middle of the platoon:

June 23rd - July 2nd:

Tt was now the 23rd of June, and a new phase of "my three weeks in Normandy" was about to begin. The march had ended at daybreak near a crossroads. While waiting to deployed in the new area, we experienced a brief, but strange strafing attack. There were several wrecked German vehicles, apparently from an air attack, in a little wood near the crossroads. Suddenly, a lone American P-47 marked with faded "invasion stripes appeared overhead. Guns blazing, it made one strafing pass at the wrecked vehicles, with us only yards away, and then flew off, departing as suddenly as it had appeared. Fortunately, no one was killed or wounded.

Shortly after the strafing incident, we were deployed to nearby fields and apple orchards. We were taking over from elements of the 101st Airborne Division who had been fighting in the area since D-Day. I recall seeing the body of one half-buried trooper, a another, very live one, trying to help a farm girl milk a cow in a field. C Company was assigned an area along a ridge which sloped gently down into a shallow valley. At the far side of the valley - about a mile west of us - loomed a high hill, running north to south. Its north end - the nearest to our position - was bald, but as it extended south, it obviously was heavily wooded. The nearest enemy positions were apparently between us and the hill. We did not know it at the time, but what we were observing for the first time, was the famous (or infamous) Hill 122 and the Foret de Mont Castre.

Over the next several days, we dug in deeper along the ridge, covering our two-man foxholes with whatever would help protect us from mortar and artillery shelling. Fortunately, there was none of the former and little of the latter (except for some artillery rounds fired at night at de crossroads several hundred yards away).

We remained in our defensive positions, facing west toward Hill 122 from approximately June 23 to July2, 1944. The following varied events are highlighted in my memory for that time frame:

1) Not surprisingly, either on the first or second night, the enemy "came calling" on us. This took the form of a large patrol which came up within 50 or so yards in front of us and fired its machine pistols complete with a lot of tracers in our general direction trying to get us to reply and reveal our exact position. It didn't work, and they never came back.

2) The next several days, intermittent rain, heavy at times, fell. There was also a fair amount of wind. Dug in as we were, it didn't seem so bad to us, but on the coast, this was the channel storm that wrecked the "Mulberry" artificial harbors at several of the invasion beaches and caused a real supply crisis for the high command.

3) There were several types of enemy ammo scattered around or area. One type were 20mm shells, usually used for anti-aircraft defense. This meant that most were High Explosive type (HE) and would explode on contact. In a fit of absentmindedness, I picked one up and started hitting it against the trunk of an apple tree! It was a very dumb thing for me to do. It didn't explode (and possibly blind or certainly maim me) probably because it was marked as a tracer which unlike HE do not explode on contact, but I hadn't noticed that before I picked it up. There was also some enemy 30 caliber rifle shells around which were wooden tipped (wood in place of the metal bullet). Troops all over the beachhead area had observed this type of ammo and it gave rise to rumors that it was a special type designed to make a more extensive, and more difficult to treat wound than a regular bullet. We didn't know then that several local

German divisions had been on maneuvers at the time of the invasion and that was the only ammo they initially had. The "secret weapon" bullets were actually the German equivalent of our blank ammunition which were only used against us for the lack of anything better:

4) My assigned foxhole mate for most of this period was not a close buddy but a rather sour West Virginia coalminer (he said) who was about 30 years old but who looked 45 or 50 to me. One day he came back from a patrol in a drunken state. He had "liberated" what looked like a two-quart bottle of Calvados (powerful, home brew apple brandy) and had consumed most of it. The problem was at night we were supposed to take alternate sentry duty in our two-man holes, an hour on - an hour off. This, of course, was absolutely essential to detect in time any enemy effort to sneak up on us. As night fell, my foxhole mate fell into a deep sleep and passed out. I took the first and what turned to be the only watch. Throughout most of the night my efforts to wake him up resulted only in muffled curses, grunts and groans. I fought a losing battle with sleep for hours. Suddenly, about three or four o'clock in the morning (few of us had watches), I swore I saw a silent file of Germans[1], complete with their "coal shuttle" helmets coming over a nearby hedgerow. I aimed my rifle at them, but just before I pulled the trigger, one of the "enemy soldiers" emitted a loud baa. They were sheep, and **I** had obviously hallucinated from exhaustion. I gave up and promptly fell asleep. Since there had been utter silence around me before and after the sheep identified themselves, I had to wonder if anyone was awake in those holes around me!

5) On June 26th, I celebrated my 19th birthday in that foxhole. There was no cake not to mention candle. I had read in Stars and Stripes that, in response to protesting Parents, the Army had changed policy and were holding 18-year-olds in training units in the U.S. until they turned 19. But I was already there.

6) Speaking of cake, the one exception to a diet of K rations and D bars during my Normandy time with the 90th Division came during this period. One day my squad sergeant masterminded a plot to steal a chicken or two from a farm few hundred yards from our positions. I was elected to divert the farmer by buying some butter to cook it in while the deed was done. I politely knocked on the farmhouse door and was admitted. With my G.I French language book opened, I tried to say: " Combien de beurre?" Naturally they could not understand me, but finally figured it out by looking in the book themselves. They weren't interested in money. A young woman asked me something like "Haben Sie Chocolaten?" but they gave me about a pound of butter anyway. Fried in deep butter in a mess gear, that chicken tasted great!

7) A sign of a coming offensive by us was an attempt made by Headquarters (Battalion, Regiment?) to infiltrate a three-man team through our Company area behind the German lines at night to observe and record their positions. The attempt was a failure. I talked briefly to the one man who came back the next morning (they were supposed to remain for several days). When surprised and told to put his hands up, he ran and got away. He thought the other two were captured.

8) Our last day in our defensive ridge position turned out to be July 2nd. During the morning, we witnessed a two plane (P-47s) strafing and bombing run on German position in the valley immediately in front of us. The planes made repeated strafing runs plus dropping several bombs each. The only response was light machine gun fire (surprisingly no 20mm defense).

In the in the afternoon of July 2nd, orders abruptly came through to leave our positions. We were re-deployed to a lower area where little could be seen to our front including any part of the now familiar Hill 122. Also, we were now facing south rather than west. The rest of the day was taken up with orientation about the coming attack.

This was done in small groups in the open by the Company Commander. He was as nervous as we were as several German 105 rounds were fired from not too far away and passed overhead to explode not too far in our rear. We were told a number of things:

[1] *For some reason, at this time, we usually called the Germans « Heinies » - a World War 1 nickname. The more familiar term « Kraut » came to predominate later.*

I) That we were part of a coordinated Corps attack by three divisions whose object was to break out of the beachhead and then head south. (After much fighting, that's exactly what happened about three weeks later).
2) For the first time, we were to have direct tank support (Shermans of the 712th Tank Battalion). He talked very optimistically about how, after we had broken through, we should get on the tanks and ride.
3) He also reported a lot of detailed stuff about the German unit immediately opposite of us--numbers of men and weapons (an exact count of their machine guns for example). He said only a company of German paratroopers were now opposing our Battalion because part of their force had recently been transferred to the Russian front. Some of this (especially the latter) was obviously propaganda for morale purposes. Our massive air attacks over many months on the enemy transportation network in that part of France had been well publicized. Germans were having a very difficult time getting man and material to the Normandy front. They weren't taking anything out. However, we did have an overall manpower edge on the enemy in the battle, but of course, they were well dug in and knew the terrain much better than we. Finally, he told us as that the attack take place at dawn the next day (July 3rd) to be preceded by a massive artillery barrage where everything would open up from heavy artillery to our own heavy machine guns and mortars.
Also, for the first time we were officially (by order) to use "marching fire" so we needed to carry extra bandoliers of ammo. Finally, the 358th would be one of the assaulting regiments, with the 1st Battalion being an assaulting battalion. We would be on the point. No one would be in front of us but the enemy.
After the Company orientation, we returned to our platoons and squads for specific preparations. I was designated assistant BAR man for my squad. In Practice, it simply meant, I had to pack extra bandoliers of ammo for our BAR man and take over if he became a casualty. He incidentally was a lanky Arkan sash and an original company man.
He didn't talk much, but when he remarked to me that "we were going into a real battle tomorrow," I believed him!
I was detailed for outpost duty for part of the night. The Company CP was in a farmhouse. While waiting to go on duty, I found several recent copies of the armed forces overseass version of Time magazine (small, no advertising). Since we were cut off from most information on the big picture of the world and even the war, I eagerly read them from cover to cover. I went on outpost. duty in a foxhole in a hedgerow for an hour or two around midnight. Other than some harassing artillery fire on both sides, everything was very quiet.

July 3rd:
A few hours later, after some sleep at the Company CP, what a contrast! In the half-light around 5:00am "all hell" let loose from our side. The promised barrage had come. I quickly returned to my squad. We spread out it a line behind the most advanced hedgerow with bayonets fixed. It was WW1 style "going over the top" but over a hedgerow not out of a trench. After about 45 minutes, the barrage suddenly lifted. Someone (I guess it was the Platoon Commander) actually blew a whistle and we took off!
We advanced from field to field (hedgerow to hedgerow) as instructed firing from the hip (marching fire) to hopefully keep the Germans heads down until we were on top of them. At first, we advanced into a smokey vacuum and met little or no enemy resistance (The division history says that we advanced 2000 yards that day)
Then resistance began to stiffen. While crossing a field, suddenly a line of machine gun fire (bullets hitting the ground and kicking up dirt) came right toward and by me like a deadly wave. it was obviously from a machine gun, pre-positioned for cross-fire. At the same time, I felt some numbness in my right foot. I looked down and saw that the whole front of my right boot was zone with my toes (still covered with the stocking) sticking out. I yelled that I was hit and hopped over to the shelter of the nearest hedgerow. My

nervous squad sergeant took my rifle and told me to wait for a medic. Then. the squad took off. When the expected blood didn't appear, I gingerly felt my protruding toes. I could still feel the heat of the bullet where it had passed under my big toe but the skin was not even broken. t had been a very close call!

Alone, and now also unarmed, I began to run after my advancing squad. At the next hedgerow, three or four Germans, one with a white handkerchief tied on a stick suddenly popped out in front of me. They seemed to have discarded all of their weapons but still had their helmets on. I don't know if they noticed that I was unarmed or not. I think they did and stayed under cover while the armed and shooting squad members went right by them.

Anyway, as we had been instructed, I waved them to the rear and again ran after my advancing squad. After several hundred yards, I caught up with them and demanded my rifle from my surprised squad leader.

I got a rifle but it wasn't mine. After firing five or six rounds it jammed. My rifle was clean and had functioned perfectly up until I gave it up.

About then, a tank appeared from somewhere ramming through each hedgerow it encountered with us now following close behind. We continued to advance in this manner until the tank reached a hedgerow it couldn't penetrate (no tank dozers yet!). This hedgerow was higher than most and like a terrace with the next field (an apple orchard) at a higher level than the one we were on. We could see a few farm buildings beyond the orchard (actually we were at the northern edge of the village of St. Jores). The company began to pile up at this terrace-hedgerow barrier. There was increasing noise and confusion with people milling around. Suddenly there was the crackle of enemy machine gun fire hitting the tank, and,outlining it with colored tracers. The tank crew promptly "buttoned up." In effect, we were getting pinned down. Suddenly I saw and heard a small explosion about ten or twelve feet away. At the same time, it felt like a couple of red-hot pokers were jammed into my left thigh. It was from a small 50mm enemy mortar (thank God it wasn't an 80mm, and this time, I was definitely wounded. The same shell knocked the man nearest its head over heels, but he was otherwise unscathed. I was in the line of the spreading cone of shell fragments and several had hit me. There was little blood as it was a puncture wound and I was still on my feet (my adrenalin was running strong!) I told the squad sergeant that this time I really was wounded, but he had other things on his mind.

I don't like to remember what I saw next, but part of the Company panicked in the confusion and ran for the rear. I saw a line of men, packs and weapons flapping, jumping over hedgerows to our rear.

(Obviously, they did not run very far as the Division history reports that after heavy fighting, St. Jores was captured and held by the end of the day by the 1st Battalion.)

Next, someone, I guess the platoon commander, talked to the tank commander through the phone at the rear of the tank. He then ordered our squad to advance to the left to try and bypass the obstacle in front of us. The idea was for us to follow the tank over to and hopefully across a road parallel to our advance (The highway from Pont l'Abbé to St. Jores). Meanwhile some of the platoon and others of Company C, were still down the terraced hedgerow on our right. (I learned later from his runner that our platoon Lieutenant was killed by a sniper shortly after he left us.)

We moved as ordered. However, as the tank hit the hedgerow bordering the field and road, it was momentarily stopped. Almost immediately there came the "wham - Bam" of a flat trajectory shell fired by a German tank or self-propelled gun. It knocked the tank out. We quickly hit the ground in a line behind the tank and along the fairly low bordering hedgerow. There was now a fair amount of machine gun fire going over our heads, and we could hear (but not see) the enemy tank or whatever that had put our tank out of commission. Then, as our tank crew piled out of their tank, the enemy gunner fired an HE (High Explosive) shell at them which exploded nearby. Shortly afterward, the tank crew crawled over us, heading for the rear. One crewman had an improvised tourniquet tied

around a mangled wrist with his hand dangling by its tendons. His eyes were glazed and he was obviously in shock. Another crew member told me he had caught some shell fragments.
With the tank knocked out, crew gone and no other "'friendlies" around us, we decided to head rearward too. However, before the word was passed, one squad member behind me inexplicably stood up and walked through the gap in the hedgerow where the farmer came in and out of the field and onto the road. Almost instantly, he was killed by machine gun fire, The opening and road were obviously zeroed in. However, having no choice, we ran past it, through some shallow water in the low corner of the field and dived over the hedgerow into the next field. Almost immediately, we heard another "wham-bam" from the high velocity gun which had knocked out the tank, this time the shell exploding where we had just been on the other side of the hedgerow! It was obvious they could see us move and were trying to keep us from getting away. We were "tracked" in this manner across several more fields.
By this time, my adrenalin was running out., My wounded thigh- and leg was numb and starting to collapse under me. We were now in a field behind a hedgerow where someone had dug a shallow slit trench, the squad leader told me to wait for the medics (I can't remember if he took my rifle again or not), and the squad continued the retreat without me. I knew what was coming next so I got down into the trench (still half exposed) and put my arms around my head. Sure enough, another tracking shell soon exploded nearby. A shell fragment hit my right hand causing a superficial wound but unlike my thigh, it was bleeding profusely.
When no additional shells were fired, I looked around. On my left, one of our 81mm mortar crews were dug in about 50 yards away firing methodically. Then, to my right, and only about 50 feet away, I saw a medical jeep half parked in a roadside ditch. (I suppose it was the same road that was parallel to our advance and retreat. Two concerned looking medics were lying in the ditch nearby looking at me. What a break. I motioned them over. They were from our Battalion Aid Station; I got their full attention. One bandaged my bleeding hand with my first aid compress. The other cut away the clothing from my left thigh and confirmed the more serious shell fragment wounds there, bandaged it and gave me some sulfa pills. They then helped me onto one of the two stretchers attached to their Jeep and we went speeding down the road and away from the battle.
As we went down that road thought to myself how fortunate I had been and that I hoped I would never have to go back into something like that again (but, of course, I did). The Battalion Aid Station was located in a one room school house. The last lessons, probably put up the day before D-Day were still chalked on the blackboard. As I lay on the stretcher waiting for a doctor to check me out, someone bent over me and kindly asked me how things were going in the battle. I responded that I didn't know about the big picture, but that we were getting the shit kicked out of us, I then noticed the crosses on the questioner's collar and realized I was talking to a chaplain. (There were probably several other profanities as well as I was still quite excited.) Then, my earlier social training took over and I apologized for my out-of-place language. The chaplain gave me a wise smile and said something like: "No apologies are necessary, I understand."
From the Battalion. Aid Station I went by ambulance through the various chain-of-command medical clearing stations, being checked out at each (all the data was on a tag around my neck). At regiment, I recall an MP guarding several walking wounded freshly captured POW's. On another ambulance ride (possibly regiment to division), I found myself the lone American patient aboard. The others were three or four wounded Germans on stretchers and a young French civilian couple sitting side by side. One of them (I believe the woman) had a shell fragment wound. By this time, I was pretty calmed down and hungry; I pulled a D bar out of my fatigues and handed it to the young Frenchman who, in turn solemnly broke it into pieces and passed it around. One of the things I noticed about the Germans was how long their hair was compared to ours. One of the wounded prisoners carefully combing his pompadour. That's something Hollywood always got wrong. They always depicted World War II German soldiers with crew cuts and all blonds!

Toward dusk on July 3rd, I found myself in a stretcher in a medical tent back at Utah Beach. A medic told me that tomorrow we would all be evacuated by landing craft off the beach to a Navy hospital ship and then taken back to England. It was quite a circle I had taken in the past three weeks since coming ashore at the same place!

July 4th:

July 4th dawned sunny at Utah Beach with the promise of a hot day. Other than the lapping of the waves it was also very quiet. They didn't seem to be unloading supplies across this beach anymore. As the morning wore on our stretchers were carried out and placed on the open deck of a US Navy LCI (Landing Craft Infantry). Most of the LCI was on the beach. Only the stern was in the water. Soon its deck was filled With wounded, but few of them were Americans, most were Germans! The seriously wounded Germans were all from a captured field hospital. They were tended by their own medics. ... I noticed one wounded German with long hair like a woman. Apparently, it was a woman.
The male German medics averted their eyes as a urinal being passed around reached her. I found myself doing the same thing (Most of us on both sides were civilized in those days and war!)
I also recall a German officer standing stiffly locking out over the wounded. He wore a monocle and fit the popular stereotype of a Nazi officer, but he was probably the doctor commanding the captured field hospital.
How, it was just a matter of the tide coming and floating us off the beach, but it was a long wait and it was getting hotter. I struck up a conversation with a German medic, about 30 years old, who spoke excellent English. In civilian life he was a small businessman from Frankfurt. He almost violently told me how stupid and wasteful he thought war was especially when it came to business and the family. He also told me that Frankfurt was then in ruins from bombing (this was ten months before VE Day) he probably meant what he said. We exchanged a few coins and also viewed each other's family snapshots. He had managed to get his wife and little girl evacuated to the Austrian Alps and away from the bombings. It continued very quiet around the beach. About the only sound now was the incoming tide. What a contrast to the battlefield. Later I read that the US section of the front, extra artillery salvos were being fired on and off during the day to celebrate this most important of our national holidays.

Finally, about 3:00pm, the LCI's motors started up. We backed off the beach and then headed for the hospital ship. It was anchored about where that British troop transport was when I had come ashore only three weeks before. Then it was on back to England and a succession of Army hospitals. I would return to Normandy in mid-October 1944 to another beach, (Omaha) and eventually to other battles. By then the war had shifted far to the east, to the other side of France. The 90th Division was fighting in Lorraine on the approaches to the German border. I would play a part in some of that fighting, but that is another story!

This account was found in my father's office at Périers on March 2025.

I made a French translation of it.

Christian Levaufre