U.S. Coast Guard Historic Documents

I N V A S I O N

The Story of the LCI (L) 92 in the Invasion of Normandy on June 6, l944.

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By Seth Shepard, Pho. M. 3c

U. S. Coast Guard

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Editor's note: The following publication was provided to us by Mr. James Mateyack, whose father served on board the LCI(L)-92 at Normandy, and we gratefully acknowledge his assistance. The article, written by Coast Guard Combat Photographer Seth Shepard, who was assigned to cover the 6 June 1944 invasion at Normandy, provides a first hand glimpse at the horror that was Omaha Beach on D-Day.

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AT A SURVIVORS BASE, PLYMOUTH, DEVON, ENGLAND, June 25, 1944

Shocked and exhausted, we crawled out of the sea over the smooth pebbles of the Normandy beach a few hours after the start of the great invasion of June 6. Around us as we sank upon the stones were dead and dying American soldiers and sailors; behind us the windswept sea broke against our burning ship; ahead of us in the hills German snipers and machine guns raked the beach. Through it all the deadly 88s and exploding mines blasted the land and sea approaches, shattering the beach and water with violent concussions and filling the gray skies with heavy smoke.

I was with this veteran U.S. Coast Guard crew through those 16 hours of tortuous waiting after our ship -- the Coast Guard manned LCI (L) 92 struck two deadly mines in swift succession, followed by direct hits from German 88s. It was the worst hell the crew had ever experienced in four major invasions. We faced death and destruction so often that day that the first shock of abandoning our burning ship under heavy fire was overcome in the tremendous struggle to establish the beachhead. Our sector was under constant German shelling the whole time we lay there wet, cold and scared without weapons, warm clothes, or food other than a few cans of soup and some Army blankets.

I think it was a grim determination to live, an answer to our prayers and to those at home who prayed for us, and luck, that saved us in our escape from the stricken ship. But we left 41 dead American soldiers behind in the forward troop compartment. They never had a chance when we struck the first mine. Thank God that most of them did not suffer a lingering death after that disastrous explosion of flame and steel. Six of our crew were wounded and burned and it was not until two weeks later that we were able to account for all.

This story I am about to tell of our grim siege, our rescue at midnight just as the year's highest tide began lapping against our hand-dug foxholes, our second trip into the beach aboard the Navy LST that picked us up, and the four long days with little sleep and no fresh clothes as we helped the badly wounded aboard LSTs, could not be told until all the crew had been accounted for at the survivor's base.

While this narrative is the story of the Coast Guard crew of the LCI 92, we cannot forget the other Naval and Coast Guard crews, and other branches of the services, especially the early waves of soldiers who went through just as much, if not more, tragedy, hell, disaster and dangerous excitement as we did that first long day. We were just one tiny part of the greatest amphibious invasion operation in all history, but we were vitally important in the establishment of that beachhead. We did hit the beach, we did land a majority of our troops, although many of them had to leave their arms and equipment aboard, and we did land the few men we carried of the brave Navy beach battalion.

There were some craft and ships that had to go in first in the "suicide squadrons" and logically

the older and more experienced Coast Guard LCIs were picked for this job. We were the second LCI of the flotilla to hit that sector of the beach, which was so heavily mined by the Germans that the first early waves after H-Hour, on the high tide, never had a real chance of backing off the beach without some sort of damage. All the world now knows that in this initial struggle the Allies were victorious and the march to Berlin began in a great new western front.

These last two weeks at a Naval survivor's base in Southwest England, where we have been gathering new clothes, signing papers for claims, getting paid, and waiting for new orders, have not dimmed our vivid memories of that invasion. And now, on the day I am writing this account, the first phase of our adventure has come to a conclusion. With seven others of the newer crew members I watched with a heavy heart the 16 veterans who had not been wounded in the assault drive off in trucks to an embarkation point for the States and home. They deserve this return for they were the majority of the crew who had been overseas for 16 months, living through four invasions in the cramped quarters of the "92." I had only been aboard a short while, but in that time I had come to know every man as a friend. The miracle of our landing on the French beach had drawn us all close together. Now as we watched our shipmates speed away in the trucks Freddy N. Pitzer, fireman first
class, USCGR, of Clarksville, Missouri, standing next to me, said what we all felt who were left behind: "There goes the best damn bunch of fellows I've ever been with."

We walked back then to the barracks, thinking about our buddies, our ship and the invasion. I know every man can be proud of the job he did on June 6, even though we were all scared as hell and hope we don't have to hit another beach as tough as that. But they all did their duty. In fact I was the only member of the crew that actually failed at his appointed task. You see, I'm a combat photographer of the U. S. Coast Guard and in the confusion of the shelling and abandoning ship I not only lost my camera and equipment but all film and pictures.

As we talked over the events in the barracks I thought of how far in the background now were the long weeks of preparation. Those days of comfortable suspense, of waiting and wondering, seem more like a haze-drenched dream than the actual prelude to battle. Yet we cannot completely forget the peaceful last weeks in England before the invasion. The fresh green of the English spring had come, leaving the cold and dampness and heavy fogs of winter behind. We were conscious all along of the essential importance of those lengthening days and to what eventually they would lead.

All the invasion veterans of North Africa, Sicily and Italy, and that included most of the crews of the Coast Guard LCIs in our flotilla, knew that no large scale operation could hope to be even partially successful without the long grind of preparation. This meant actual maneuvers along the coast of England - - called "dry runs" - - and those million and one little items, plans, stores, orders that must in the end dovetail into the complete pattern.

Weeks before the invasion we felt the time was approaching. Most of the ships of our LCI flotilla

had been tied up at the docks in a South of England base -- a seaside resort in peacetime. The daily routine included chipping decks, painting topsides and in the bilges, getting the whole ship in first class condition. And that meant work for the crew, including watches, not the romantic or thrilling war epics of which we so often hear but seldom meet. It was a time every man wished for at least a look at the good old States, was sick and tired of the regimented military life and the long months of overseas duty aboard a cramped little amphibious ship. On an LCI the crew eats and sleeps in the same small compartment and uses it also for a recreation room.

Yet at the same time, conscious of what was to come, I think each man to himself felt that he was in a way glad to be in the operation that was to make history. Perhaps not actually glad, but at least conscious that he was doing something vitally important for his country that he could be proud of in the years to come.

It was after the ship had been lightened some by taking off such non-essential equipment as the washing machine on the stern, that the first of the new gear began arriving. Too, we began to hear of the growing feeling back home in anticipation of the coming invasion. Needless to say the crew constantly talked invasion and we all wished that it would hurry up and come. Waiting is tough.

Our first bit of suppressed excitement came when Army blankets were brought aboard. Just before that we had been issued new gas masks, gas suits and decontamination gear in case of enemy gas attacks. A few days later colored troops loaded crates of Army field rations, the same as before Sicily and Italy. This crowded up the well deck above the two forward troop compartments. Then from that day on supplies and equipment came trickling aboard that gave us every hint that the amphibious ships were getting set for some large scale movement.

One bright morning we woke to find that the outer harbor had begun to fill with Allied warships, from all kinds of amphibious craft to destroyers and on up to huge battleships. When they remained there in full concentration we knew that the big event was really shaping up.

Finally, the skipper, Lieutenant Robert M. Salmon, USCGR, of Maplewood, N.J., who brought the ship across the Atlantic from Norfolk, Va., 16 months ago and through the Mediterranean invasions, was called to a secret meeting one night. He didn't arrive back aboard until 3 A.M. Before breakfast the scuttlebutt was flying fast and when we came up from chow we found posted on the ship's bulletin board strict new regulations canceling all liberty. In fact no one was even allowed off the ship unless in some official work party to be always accompanied by an officer. We were not to speak to anyone on the docks, even Naval personnel. The men of the repair base were restricted; movies in the evening were stopped, and aboard our ship the ominous two section sea watch list was posted to take effect, it said, whenever the Captain should so direct. The order came out, too, to secure all painting and to get everything in readiness to cast off suddenly. The time was drawing short.

I remember that last night before the troops came aboard. There were more than the usual letter writers huddled around the big table in the sticky air of the crew's quarters, below in the center of the ship. A number of men quickly took the advantage to send money orders home when our executive officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Zack Felder, USCGR, of Dallas, Texas, passed out the word.

The next day, June 2, messages from General Eisenhower and high Naval officers were posted on the bulletin board telling us of the coming invasion. All that morning the small boats from American and British transports plowed through the harbor, taking on troops at the base. In the afternoon the first soldiers came marching down the docks to swarm aboard the outboard LCIs of our flotilla. We noticed from the start that the troops looked extremely hardened and tough and in fine condition. They were rather quiet and serious, though not solemn.

The troops we were to carry came aboard at 2:30 A.M. the next morning, June 3. When I went above to stand a regular four-hour gangway watch, the troops were mostly just sitting on deck in the sun, doing nothing in particular except for some singing to themselves. There was one big bushy-eyed fellow up forward, with a soft southern mountain accent, singing a mournful song. One Joe was fixing his pipe, another polishing his home-made lighter. Others were propped up on the boxes of K rations calmly reading armed service's edition books. Many were stretched out in their bunks below asleep. There were, of course, the inevitable card and crap games, although the limited space aboard the cramped ship made this difficult. Most of the soldiers playing cards were using the crisp new French Franc issue, which looked like stage money.

Some of the soldiers took apart their guns and drew our Coast Guard crew as interested observers. For ourselves, we of course had our watches to stand, but mainly we kept to ourselves in the crew's quarters, playing the "92's" most popular game, "Acey-Ducey" and poker. Some of us went around trying to find guys from our home towns. J. W. Spring, motor machinist's mate third class, USCGR, of (2524 Loving Street) Fort Worth, Texas, found a fellow Texan from his home town and they spent the whole evening talking over old times and, of course, Texas.

At times we lined the rail to watch the troops, on the dock, go through stiff exercises, which they did with a healthy gusto. As they limbered up and became more familiar with the ship they grew more talkative and spirited, and the old American habit of horseplay was much more in evidence.

June 4th was Sunday. Although we knew that the next day was the time set for our departure, we were all rather calm and no different from any other day. I slept until 11 A.M. that morning and then had the regular 12 to 4 P.M. gangway watch. We all tried to get as much sleep as possible because once underway we knew there would be very little time for rest. The usual Sunday church services were held and the usual number of our crew went, but no more. The Skipper spent most of the day in the chart room plotting his courses and going over his instructions. Occasionally an army officer would consult with him. Late in the afternoon an Army chaplain came aboard and with a megaphone spoke to the troops from the upper deck of a Navy LCI tied alongside us. The troops sat in all manner of positions in the well deck, staring out in space,

looking at the deck, thinking or dreaming. Then they sang a few songs which dragged and were slightly off key, but they still sounded okay and sort of lifted us up a little.

Later on we had a muster in our crew's quarters and Mr. Felder explained what to do in case of being taken prisoner. Though there was seriousness to the directions there were hilarious jibes made by the fellows which started a series of jokes about what we would tell the Germans. No one had the slightest idea they would be captured. We were all in a confident mood, and, I think, fairly optimistic about the whole invasion.

After chow that night, which already was getting to be very monotonous as we were using those K rations, I got to thinking about this canned age war. Everywhere I looked on deck there were cans of this and that. There were even individual cans of coffee. And who will ever forget the canned soup that cooks itself. All you do is shake the can, punch two holes, and pull up the wick and light it. Woosh, the chemical in the little top compartment goes off and in a couple of minutes you have a steaming can of hot soup. We were later to be very thankful for that self cooking soup when we were wet and cold on the French beach.

That evening I sat up on the bow with Bobby Gene Smith, seaman first class, of (700 Austin Street) Wichita Falls, Texas, who was on gun watch. After some playful jibes over what knots I could or couldn't tie, we fell into a more reflective mood.

"You know, Smitty," I said, "by looking at all these soldiers and sailors in their uniforms you wouldn't think they were split up in different outfits, like the Army, Navy, Seabees, Coast Guard, Navy Beach Battalion and so on. Why, you can hardly tell an enlisted man from an officer in their steel helmets and battle clothes. I'd say it really is a 'combined operation', as the British say."

"That's right," Smitty said. "But no matter what uniforms they have you can tell they're Americans, even from just the way they walk or look around."

Came Monday and with it gray skies and colder weather - - invasion weather, we said. Still at the docks, the troops continued with their exercises. There was a more restless feeling among everyone, but also more laughter and jokes. At one time Allied planes were flown over the harbors, rather low, in order that we could see the type of identification to be used in the invasion. After this the troops took showers on the docks, running up the gangway in their skivvies.

At 3:45 in the afternoon Chief Boatswain's Mate Charles Campen, USCG, of Hertford, North Carolina, told us in the crew's quarters that at 5 p.m. sea watches of four hours on and four hours off would go into effect. We didn't have to be told what this meant. A stranger among us would never know from our hilarity, yelling and horseplay that we were about to participate in one of

the greatest undertakings in history. In fact I don't think anyone thought of it historically at the time. I know I didn't. But there was a general excitement underneath our playfulness, and also optimism touched with some feeling of tenseness. I didn't go around asking everybody how they felt and no one asked me. But I know for myself I had a feeling of something like stage fright, or more accurately, the feeling a high school boy often gets just before the vital game with a rival school. As for the Army and Navy men we were carrying, they gave no real outward sign of what they were thinking. On the whole I would say everyone was exceptionally calm and ready. Various army officers gave their groups a talk and last minute instructions in the troop compartments. Certainly there was nothing overly dramatic. Things just continued to go along as they had, smoothly. For us, our last orders were to be sure to wear our gas suits at all times, our heavy impregnated shoes and socks and keep our gas masks with us.

We left the docks in the midst of evening chow. I remember Eugene J. Snarski, seaman first class, USCGR, of (12883- Sparling Street) Detroit, Michigan, whom we called "Jeep" although he was long and lanky, sliding down the ladder
to his unfinished meal and good humoredly complaining:

"I don't know why we always have to shove off just in the middle of chow, especially when we have some white bread for a change." Modest "Jeep", who received the Purple Heart previously for wounds he sustained in the Salerno, Italy, invasion aboard another Coast Guard manned LCI, was later to be the most badly wounded of our crew.

After eating I went above with my camera and found we were just entering the outer harbor, which in reality was no harbor but a large bay. Everywhere the ships were beginning to take their positions. LCIs, LSTs, transports, destroyers, escort vessels, even cruisers and battleships. All the LSTs had a large barrage balloon flying above them and the LCIs looked topheavy with the mass of troops on deck. We all watched the memorable sights of the vast flotillas of ships stretching in every direction.

As we stood out into the channel our group formed into what seemed
like three endless columns of LCIs. Then later as we left the bay astern our three columns were joined by a flanking fourth column of the famous little 83 foot Coast Guard cutters and a long line of huge transports beyond. On the horizon were destroyers and other escort vessels. The wind was brisk and it was definitely chilly topsides. The heavy clouds gave a dull gray hue to the water, except for the white breakers. Our ship rolled a bit and some of the soldiers stood near the rail as they began to feel that queer sensation in their stomachs.

At first we hugged the coast line but as twilight set in we began to ease away from the high cliffs of Southern England. At 8:30 P.M., on a course of 110 degrees - ESE - we watched 74 planes fly over high in the clouds. They were P-38s. This was the largest concentration of planes at one time we had seen, although all evening bunches of Spitfires had flown over. Those planes made us feel more secure and were always a grand sight. Off our port quarter now we could make out in the evening haze more ships of task forces and amphibious flotillas coming out of other harbors.

At 9:30 P.M. I went below to warm up and get some more film equipment. The crew off watch was trying to sleep in the crowded quarters, but they were having a hard time because of the early hour, the excitement and laughter. I decided that I might as well shave since no one was in the head at the time. I only cut myself once, which I thought was good going for the way the ship was pitching in the choppy channel sea. On my way back to the crew's quarters I looked down a troop compartment hatch and saw a group of soldiers rolling the dice, enjoying themselves. But most of the soldiers were just waiting quietly, with their own silent thoughts.

At 10 P.M. I went back up to the conning tower to find it still cloudy and cold and windy. The officers and men in the conn, which on an LCI is open to the sky shoulder high, and the highest part of the ship, seemed to be in a good mood, eating candy and cracking jokes. The Captain said it was his opinion that the morale of the troops was the highest of any invasion they had been through and everyone agreed. Chief Campen pointed out to me the growing number of LCTs coming out from land. There were so many it was impossible to count them all as they dotted the horizon. At 10 P.M. the Skipper went below for a while and turned the ship over to Warrant Boswain James C. Cubbedge, USCG, watch officer, of (3565 NW 36 Street) Miami, Florida. The order was also passed to keep a special lookout for the dangerous German E-boats, which have a habit of sneaking in on channel shipping and doing damage with their torpedoes.

Soon I decided that the best place for me was in my "sack" if I was going to be up in the early hours of the morning. So I went below and crawled into the bunk. I couldn't go right off to sleep but the last thing I remember was the one shaded light hanging down over the mess table, swinging back and forth and sending its faint rays over the tiers of three bunks, most of them filled with sleeping forms, relaxed and trusting and not knowing what hell they would be facing in less than 10 hours.

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On through the blackness of the cloudy night the ship sped across the channel in a great armada of ships. I slept soundly, dreaming and hearing nothing until 3:40 A.M. - June 6. Suddenly awakened by the clanging of the alarm bell - general quarters - I sprang out of my bunk and tried to dress with record speed. Like everyone, I had slept in my clothes except for the outer gas suit and my heavy shoes. I was the last man to scramble up the dark ladder, after grabbing my camera and film.

Climbing up to the conn as the night wind whipped the spray across the deck, I could just make out the dark form of the ship and hurrying figures. Once I got up, though, I could see bright flashes in the distant horizon ahead and some flares closer by. Apparently the Skipper had sounded general quarters as a precautionary measure when the flares went off. A few minutes later secure from general quarters was given and the crew on watch from midnight to 4 went below.

Now in the distance ahead, along the French coast, we could see sharp flashes of brilliant

explosions and heavy anti-aircraft fire and hear the deep rumble of the blasting and firing. As my eyes became more accustomed to the darkness I could make out the dark shapes of landing craft and ships surrounding

us. We had finally reached our objective and now the LCIs were slowly following each other in a long circular movement. The beach on which we were to land was 16 miles away. All the while I was conscious of that eerie whistling of the wind through the rigging. It was cold and I pulled up the hood of my gas suit over my steel helmet and tightened my life jacket. I was going to be very thankful for that jacket later on.

Now the dawn of that momentous day began breaking. The blackness changed into a shadowy gray and then into a more distinct but still dull gray until the rays of the sun - - still below the horizon - - began streaking the heavy clouds with traces of pale pink. This suddenly burst forth into brilliant red for a few minutes and then as suddenly disappeared into the bluish gray morning skies.

We knew a tremendous air attack was to begin at 5:45 A.M. on the German-held coast and we could see the flights of huge bombers far overhead as they roared through the clouds, on their way. When Paul E. Lambert, signalman second class, USCGR, of (7600 Washington Street) Marquette, Michigan, at his station in the conn, said the planes were "a good sight to see," he echoed all of our thoughts. We were later to be very grateful to the Allied air forces who kept the German planes away. Most of the crew had vivid memories of the German air raids in Italy and especially one night at Bizerte. Another good sight were the destroyers which risked a great deal in covering us so near the German land batteries.

At 5:50 A.M. the LCIs of our flotilla formed into two columns and swung in toward land, now hazy as an early morning mist blew in off the channel. There were ships in all directions as far as the eye could see. We could not help gasping with amazement at the complete coordination of this vast array of shipping despite the confusing picture it presented on the surface. At 6:45 we sped past columns of LSTs unloading trucks, tanks, jeeps, equipment through their huge bow doors onto the long flat Rhino (?) barges. We could see the waves slapping over the barges and men and equipment.

And on we went through the gray seas while the oncoming fog closed in astern of us. By 7 A.M. we knew that the first waves of small landing boats had already hit the beaches and we wondered how they were making out. All we could see ahead was a smoky haze over the approaching land, which we now could see was not as flat as we first thought. All the crew were at their beaching stations and the ramps were in readiness for lowering. The spray over the bow kept the men forward wiping their streaming faces. At 7:30 we passed the attack transports, recognizing some of our Coast Guard ships. We were all tense now, saying little and watching with eagle eyes. General quarters was sounded at 7:45 and soon we were approaching the cruisers and destroyers shelling the coast, half hidden by smoke screens, which mixed in with the haze and grayness.

At 8 A.M. we were less than three miles from land and amidst the firing warships throwing up a continuous bombardment. The wind continued brisk and I could see the forward gun crew bracing themselves against the waves which shot over the bow. Ahead of us everywhere were small landing craft and now the beach itself was plainly visible, even with the smoke. Suddenly I realized that we were in for a tough time as I made out shattered Higgins boats on the beach and men running to take cover. I could see a few houses in the lee of the hill, wrecked and on fire. My heart beat multiplied when I looked over the starboard

bow, near the beach, and saw the Coast Guard manned LCI 91 enveloped in flames and smoke. She was the first LCI to hit that sector of the beach and we were scheduled as the second.

Below us, in the pilot house, Edward E. Pryzbos, quartermaster first class, USCG, (record of address lost) at the steering controls, gave one look at the "91", and yelled to our two waiting pharmacist's mates:

"Looks as if we're going to have a rough landing." Raymond A. Maleska, pharmacist's mate second class, USCGR, of (4 Stone Street) Yonkers, N.Y., known to all as "Doc", and Rudolph J. Hursey, pharmacist's mate second class, USNR, of Chesterfield, South Carolina, known as "Pop", hurried aft to be ready with their
first aid kits.

On we went. The beach was a few hundred yards off now and we could see the wooden and steel traps set by the Germans on which some of the Higgins boats had ripped out their bottoms. Smoke was everywhere and we smelled the powder of battle. We felt nearby explosions from shells and could see funnels of water shoot up in the air. The Skipper was standing forward in the conn, griping the handrail as he directed the ship by speaking through the tube to the pilot house Lambert, the signalman, stood on the starboard side of the conn, with ear phones on. I was on the port side by the signal light with my camera, bracing myself to take a picture. Then it came!

A terrifying blast lifted the whole ship upward with a sudden lurch from the bow. A sheet of flame and steel shot out from the forward hold. The ship quivered as if it were pulling apart and the concussion threw the three of us in the conn backward and down hard. The heat was like the midst of a blast furnace. We were stunned for an instant and our ears were ringing with the deafening vibrations. Seconds later another shattering explosion shook the ship like a toy boat and a rain of shrapnel splattered the shivering LCI.

In that first blast from the mine, which set fire to the main fuel tanks and blew out a hole in the starboard side big enough to drive a Higgins boat through, 4l soldiers in the forward troop compartment were trapped in a fiery furnace, most of them being killed instantly. The first explosion blew two of the soldiers out the hatch and the sheet of flame shot aft through the pilot-house ports, singeing the eyebrows and hair of Morton A. Rabinowitz, radioman third class,

USCGR of (796 Eastern Parkway) Brooklyn, N.Y., who was standing inside on the annunciators to the engine room.

But the worst concentration of explosive fire centered forward where many of our crew were working to lower the ramps and on the anti-aircraft gun. Snarski, who was inboard on the port winch on the well deck, was trapped where he stood, getting the full force of the blast in his face, setting his head on fire. He was badly burned in the face, head, hands, legs, arms. Martin Masariu, fireman first class, USCGR, of (17 North Addison Street) Indianapolis, Indiana, outboard on the winch, was thrown backward almost to the number 1 hatch, or about 15 feet. His hair was blazing. Raymond Macht, seaman first class, USCGR, of (2863 North Oakland Avenue) Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the starboard winch outboard, was also blasted backward, the flame burning his face. Macht saw that Masariu's hair was on fire so he quickly slapped his hands over Masariu's head, putting out the fire but burning his own hands. Vincent DiFalco, motor

machinist's mate third class, USCGR, of (63 Terrace Avenue) Providence, R.I., on the winch with Macht, luckily escaped with just burned hands, although he was near the center of the explosion.

Arthur L. Lornson, Jr., seaman first class, USCGR, of (256 Kaukauna Street) Menasha, Wisconsin, standing on the port side just aft of the ramp and forward of the check line, was just about to swing the lead line when we struck the mine. He was hurled overboard in the cold water, coming up astern of the ship. He yelled but because of the noise and confusion no one heard him. The current carried him through some oil over near a piling which he grabbed and hung on 'til he gathered some strength to swim ashore. Just a few seconds after he left the piling an 88 shell hit it directly. Lornson eventually made the beach in a bitter struggle against swirling water.

Raymond Norman Patterson, seaman first class, (931 Opelouses Avenue) Algiers, La., was burned on the back of the neck while he was at the port check line, aft of the ramp. On the other check line across the ship both Smith and Richard Paladino, ship's cook third class, of Elizabeth, N. J., were untouched and ran aft to help some of the soldiers who were hit near the stern when an 88 sprayed shrapnel there.

Up on the bow near the forward gun, in charge of men working on the ramps, was Gentry W. Warden, coxswain, USCGR, of (424 Masquite Street) Ranger, Texas. He was thrown over the gun turret onto the port ramp. Then as an 88 shell hit the ramp a dangerous piece of shrapnel pierced his forearm lodging next to the bone. The port ramp was twisted somewhat away from the ship, making it impossible to lower.

On the forward gun Herbert Nolda, coxswain, USCGR, of Lincoln, Nebraska, went through the first blast, but on his way aft was knocked down when an 88 truck the ship close by the No. 2 troop hatch between the bulwarks. I remember Nolda was the first person I saw as I pulled

myself up on the conn and looked down an instant. His face was bleeding badly from shrapnel wounds in his jaw.

The scene was extreme confusion. The piles of K rations and gear for the soldiers were littered over the well deck. Flames and dense smoke were pouring from the hatch, the ramps were damaged making both impossible to lower. Everywhere were faces blackened from the smoke and fire.

Mr. Felder, also on the bow, was shaken up and slightly burned in the face. It was a miracle that Charles R. Higgins, seaman first class, USCGR, of Pottsboro, Texas, with the phones on the forward gun, escaped unharmed, as well as John F. Mateyack, seaman first class, USCGR of (5743 West 90th Place) Oaklawn, Illinois.

On the port ramp was Lawrence Davison, ship's cook third class, of Erie, Pennsylvania, ready to take in the anchor, but apparently the first blast threw him overboard and he was missing, to our knowledge, for 10 days after the invasion. We understand now that he later turned up at a hospital in England, wounded. None of our crew has seen him, so his story will have to wait.

Meanwhile, in the engine room, heavy black smoke was forced back through blower system from the explosion and fire forward. Chief Machinist's Mate Frederick Sutton, USCG, of (Address lost) and Spring were on the throttle.

Pitzer was at his declutching station and Gaylord W. Jones, electrician's mate first class, USCGR, of (245 North Broadway) Glendale, California, had both generators running. Thrown off balance in the first shock, the "black gang" stayed at their posts despite the heavy smoke choking them. They had no real idea of what was happening because the phones went dead after an 88 struck the conn. They could feel the ship shaking from the explosions and grabbed their steel helmets. They knew that at any time the one hatch leading up to the deck could be hit and trap them below, but finally they were driven from the engine room in order to breathe.

It was just after they came up from the after hatch that we missed Lester P. Phillips, motor machinist's mate first class, USCGR, of (l5l61/2 Central Avenue) Charlotte, North Carolina. Stationed at the after winch, "Smi1ie" as we called him was knocked overboard and carried out by the currents. He couldn't holler because of the combination of oil and salt water that clogged his mouth. His life jacket saved him for he was in the water about an hour. Exhausted and partially paralyzed from the underwater concussion from shells and mines exploding, Phillips was finally seen by a LCT, which actually scooped him out of the sea with the bow ramp. We thought Phillips was missing until he showed up at the survivor's camp 10 days later.

Meanwhile, I had gathered up some of the precious film in the conn. The Skipper and Lambert had of course already left to help below and I knew, with those shells bursting around us, that I was just inviting trouble by staying up there exposed to direct hits and flying shrapnel. It was

shortly after I climbed down the ladder to the signal deck that an 88 shell pierced the conn in a blinding flash and explosion, sending a huge piece of shrapnel hurtling through a ready box forward, but fortunately did not set off the ammunition.

After glancing through the forward ports of the pilot house I came back to the hatch and saw Lieutenant (j.g.) George A. Finn, our engineering officer, bravely attempting to cut away the ladder made fast along the upper deck life lines. He was out in the open exposed to the machine gun fire on the beach. He had to give up the attempt when shells began exploding closer. I glanced off the starboard beam and saw the "91" belching black smoke, but I had no time to pay attention in that direction, although I knew the other crew must have had as bad a time if not worse than we.

By now we were drifting in a little farther for the aft anchor cable had slackened. I went below to the main deck amidst the confusion and agony of burned and suffering soldiers. Some of the crew had managed to get one fire hose rigged up and were playing a stream of water through the forward escape hatch. I saw Army officers pleading with their men to get off as quickly as possible. Some soldiers were jumping overboard and others slid or let themselves down a chain up forward of the damaged ramp. The cries of some of the helpless soldiers in the deep water were pitiful. All the while the terrific explosions, fire and heavy smoke filled the air and the littered decks heaved under the impact of still other shells as they ripped through steel plates.

I went aft and saw "Doc" Maleska and "Pop" Hursey aiding the wounded amidst the chaos. Without their cool stand as they swabbed the burned faces, necks and hands of soldiers and our own crew, there would have been many more bad cases of burns.

By now the order to abandon ship had been passed, but because of the thunderous noise and condition of the ship not all the crew heard the order immediately. The Skipper had previously asked me to help fight the fire and I had gone forward, climbing over the crates of rations to relieve some of the others coughing from the heavy smoke. I lay low over the boxes playing the dwindling stream of water over the well deck and down the escape hatch of the troop compartment where the dead soldiers lay. I soon realized that it was hopeless to put out the fire with this little trickle of water. It seemed like every few seconds an 88 came whooshing over my head and as I ducked down the violent explosion would vibrate against my head, echoing in my helmet. I think it was then I felt more scared and lonely than at any time that day.

As the bulwarks on each side of me shut off the view I did not know the crew was abandoning ship until Mr. Finn yelled to me. I crawled back over the crates, stopping a couple of times to duck when I heard the whoosh sound of the 88s. Some of the crew and soldiers had gone in a rubber life raft but most of them had to swim for it. I decided to make one last attempt to salvage some of my film so I ran down the companion way, slid down the ladder and grabbed some stuff lying in my bunk. I heard the generators still running and the crew's quarters had not been touched by fire or shells as yet. Everything was as we left it. I even grabbed a hunk of bread on

the mess table. I had forgotten to eat breakfast that morning.

When I rushed up on deck, keeping close to the side of the cabin, I saw the other raft already filled with the last men. Some others were letting themselves down the rope ladder over the side. I followed the last men over the starboard side as the ship was broaching to. The good old life jacket kept me up and I used my arms and legs like mad to get me ashore. The tide had already reached the high water mark and was flowing out now. My steel helmet kept my head too low and the heavy high shoes kept pulling me down, but I made it alright.

The boys on the raft had a tougher time because of the tide and mines around them. We saw bodies floating face down near us. One 88 hit directly ahead of the raft, spraying the men with water.

DiFalco, who had burned his hands, was struggling in the water, worn out. He saw a dark floating object and tried to grab onto it. But our first class gunner's mate, Michael Robert Zaley, USCG, of (825 North Pennsylvania Avenue) Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, who had kept our guns in first class condition, was nearby and saw that the object was a mine. He yelled at DiFalco to steer clear. DiFalco did.

Once up on the beach we sank exhaustedly on the pebbles, reaching the lowest point of human existence. But the shock of the 88s around us and the sniper's fire soon brought us to our senses. We began to crawl forward up to a small retaining wall of pilings that held back the earth and grass above the beach. This was the only protection from German shells and the machine gun firing from the hills ahead of us. There we began to dig in. Further down the Navy beach battalion men were trying to set up a signal light on the beach for the incoming ships. Each time they started sending a few letters we would hear a "zing" and out of commission would go the light again. Those German snipers were accurate at times. The Army medics and Navy corpsmen ran back and forth

aiding the wounded men. Some of the soldiers stretched out along the beach were a horrible sight with parts of their body shot away. I was impressed time and again at the lack of moaning or cries from the wounded. They lay there still, waiting with haunted eyes, but not asking for help because they knew that every able soldier with a gun was needed forward in the lines.

Now as the tide went out it left our burning ship high and dry on the beach. Some of us sneaked back aboard, dodging sniper's fire, and we tossed over some canned pea soup and Army blankets. Then we moved down the beach, away from the ship which was still a target and drawing fire. I was still shivering rather violently as I lay down on the beach with my wet clothes and the cold wind from the channel blowing across me. I never realized a human being could vibrate as much as I did then. But there were others too shaking in the cold.

The only incident that made us smile a little during that grim siege was when portly Jones came

marching down the beach with his fishing rod over his shoulder. He had managed to salvage this, which to him was more valuable than food then. Leonard W. Baker, officer's steward third class, USCG, of (26 Charles Street) Charleston, South Carolina, was one of those who went back to the ship. He had his sea bag in the stern steering engine room, which was farthest from the fire. Baker went below to get some clothes, but suddenly a machine gun opened up, splattering a rat-a-tat on the hull. Baker flew up the ladder, let himself over the side as fast as possible and dug in on the beach. He decided that clothes were not so important when the enemy had the range.

Meanwhile, George William Oswald, seaman first class, USCGR, of (1215 Pine Hollow Road) McKees Rock, Pennsylvania, had dug in along the pilings behind a stalled tank. But soon the Germans began opening up on the tank and Oswald left in a hurry. "It was too hot for me," he said as he joined our main party farther up the beach.

The story of the beach has been already told and it is no use to go into it again. Needless to say, we had a grandstand seat the rest of the day to the proceedings, which at times was dismal when we had to watch our own ships, tanks, landing craft and equipment blown sky high when a German 88 scored a hit. But we cheered the tremendous blasting by our heavy Naval ships, whose shells flew over our head with terrifying speed and noise. We watched the first German prisoners, hands on head, come down the beach under guard of Army MPs. They certainly knew the danger of their own guns for they hit the beach stretched flat at the first whoosh sound of the 88s.

In the early evening the Germans began a new barrage and we realized that if we were going to survive that night we would have to dig fox holes along those pilings, which we did, scraping the skin off our hands as we dug through the rocks and rough dirt below. We learned two days later, after being picked up, to our horror, that the Germans had set booby traps just below our foxholes. If we hadn't been rescued that night we probably would have dug in deeper and perhaps blown ourselves up. At any rate, it was nearing midnight while three LCMs managed to get in to the beach about a quarter mile down from us. They were sent in to evacuate wounded and survivors. We were feeling pretty low by then for the tide was once more coming in. In fact it was beating against the mounds of stone and dirt in front of our foxholes and before long would have run us up above the pilings. The oncoming tide on the pebbles sounded just like machine gun fire, adding to our nervousness.

So when the LCMs hit the beach we walked down the road above the pilings. The full moon rising back of us gave a hideous light to the dead bodies lying along the beach road. Then we saw bodies stacked up like a lumber pile down farther. But we made the boats without drawing any fire. Most of the snipers, however, had been driven out of the hill overlooking the beach, but there was still danger of 88s. We helped the wounded into the boats and then followed them on. Most of our crew stayed together, but Chief Campen, Lambert, Pryzbos and Hurzey were separated and helped to load the very badly wounded on another LCM. We were taken to an LST, waiting a few miles out to unload her cargo and Army troops. But just as we were climbing

aboard we had our first German air raid of the night. A German raider swooped by the LST in a long arc, just missing the barrage balloon, to fly along the beach and strafe. We had gotten off that beach just in time.

Completely worn out and hungry we groped along the dark deck and went below. Besides the Army troops and their equipment aboard and the regular Navy crew, there were over 100 badly wounded jammed in the crew's bunks and soldier's bunks. So we survivors had to flop down anywhere we could find on the deck. I lay down on the steel deck in a troop compartment where there were some badly wounded soldiers. I was so hungry I couldn't sleep much, but I finally fell off, only to wake almost every hour. During an air raid, when the shrapnel started falling like hail on the decks, we all jumped up mainly because of our nerves. The next morning more wounded were brought aboard, further jamming the ship. We sat out in the channel all day because the Germans were still shelling the beachhead and it was too risky for a big LST. But our heavy ships blasted the coastline and by Thursday we went into the beach and discharged the soldiers and their heavy equipment. Meanwhile, we survivors turned to and helped the medics with the wounded, which we did until Saturday night when we arrived back in England. I'll never forget those peaceful English hills and how good they looked to us after the French coast under fire. All the time that we aided the wounded by serving them their meals, feeding them and washing the canteens and dishes, we did not have any change in clothing until we reached the survivors base, nor any showers until the last night aboard the LST. Most of us hadn't brushed our teeth since the night before the invasion. So you can imagine what a motley crew we were that Saturday night after the invasion when we marched off at a Southern British port and were taken to a tent city for the night. The following day, Sunday, we were jammed into a Navy truck and driven over 100 miles across the South to the survivor's base, where we found thousands of other survivors packed in the camp. We were given a mattress and blankets, and for the first time in a week slept comfortably a full and quiet night. Not a man of our crew got up for breakfast that next morning and most of us slept right through to dinner time.

And so ends our invasion week, an experience we will never forget. Will we meet next on some Pacific beach? We hope not, but we will be ready if we must. We know that until we have Berlin and Tokyo the war is not won. And we mean to win.

- USCG -

INVASION ... SHEPARD ...