

When I was 24 years old, I learned through a family friend I knew at the local Draft Board, that I was about to be drafted, about one week before my official notice was due to arrive. With this in mind, I enlisted in the Army with the hope of being a mechanic in the Army Air Corps or in the Army's Motor Pool, since in civilian life I was an automobile mechanic. At the time the Army needed qualified mechanics for the various pieces of equipment needed to execute its battle plan. Unfortunately for me, the Army had other ideas. Very few men were drafted into jobs that had anything to do with their previous experiences.



After basic training and being shipped overseas to England, I was assigned to "M Company", 115<sup>th</sup> Infantry, of the Army's 29<sup>th</sup> Division. This was a Heavy Weapons company slated for the first wave, "H – Hour", of the Invasion of Normandy.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1944, two days before the invasion, after being on the Troup Transport ships for almost a week, we were off-loaded into LCI's (Landing Craft Infantry). These were the boats that would take us onto the beaches. Originally designed to hold an entire Company of men, (about 250), for a period of only a few hours, with only two toilets. As luck would have it, after being put on these boats, awaiting the orders to "GO", the weather turned stormy, and the invasion was delayed for two days.

As you can imagine, sanitary conditions were deplorable. Everyone was huddled shoulder-to-shoulder for the entire 40 plus hours on board these boats. We bobbed around like corks in the English Channel, and everyone on board including some of the Navy crew members were seasick.

Finally, sometime after midnight on June 6<sup>th</sup>, the weather forecast called for clearing skies and better weather. General Dwight David Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander of the invasion forces made the final decision to start the invasion at dawn on the morning of June 6<sup>th</sup>. At around 5:15am we began to head for the beaches. Still several hundred yards from the beach, enemy fire began zeroing in on our boats. To make matters worse, our own Navy Destroyers and Battleships, which were supposed to be firing their huge guns toward the enemy

positions hiding in the cliffs above the beaches, were actually falling short resulting in a lot of “Friendly Fire” casualties.

Along with my Squad, we also had a Navy Liaison Officer who was supposed to direct the Navy artillery fire, and a Stars & Stripes reporter responsible for documenting the first minutes of the invasion.

I was supposed to be the first Sergeant to lead my Squad off of the first LCI to hit Utah Beach at H-Hour. We were under heavy machine gun and artillery fire when we finally made it to the beach. When we were in close enough for our men to get off, the ramps were lowered. The ramps were designed to off-load the men into waist deep water. As soon as the ramp on my side hit the water it was blown off by an artillery shell.

At the time I weighed one hundred and eighteen pounds and was carrying over ninety pounds of equipment. Since the ramp was gone there was no alternative but to jump into the water which was well over our heads. I jumped in and immediately sunk to the bottom and felt myself beginning to drown, not being able to move with all of that heavy equipment which was now waterlogged. Lucky for me a sailor saw me go down. He dove into the water and dragged me all the way to shore where I could finally stand. I have no idea who he was, and I never got a chance to thank him for saving my life.

As soon as we made it onto the beach, the Navy Liaison Officer and the Stars & Stripes reporter were killed by enemy fire along with hundreds of our soldiers. With the death of the Navy Officer, there was no one to direct our Destroyer’s artillery fire, which continued to fall short. This, combined with the heavy German artillery and machine gun fire, contributed to pinning us down on the beach for more than six hours. We finally broke through somewhere around 12:00 noon and began our advancement toward our first objective which was St Lo.

After two days of continuous hedgerow fighting, we were attacked by a several German tanks. They surrounded us and began a barrage of heavy fire from their huge guns. Everyone in my Company was either killed, or wounded from the waist down and couldn’t walk, including all of my Squad members. I was wounded by shrapnel in my right arm and was the only one able to walk and make it to an Aid Station. On my way to the Aid Station, I told a couple of Medics what happened and they went in to help the wounded.

After bandaging my right arm, I went back to check on my men, all of them, including the Medics, were executed with a bullet to the back of their heads.

I then tried to catch up with other units to continue our push forward. Since I was now a Sergeant with no Squad, a Major ordered me to lead a Squad of men I didn't even know, for a reconnaissance mission. We were looking for a large German artillery encampment about twenty miles behind enemy lines. We were in about eighteen miles when a huge German convoy of heavy trucks, tanks, halftracks, horse-drawn artillery and lots of German soldiers closed in on us. We jumped into a ditch on the side of the dirt road we were on, and since night had fallen, they didn't even know we were there. When the last pieces of equipment were going by, one my men panicked and began to fire his rifle at the German soldiers. The last piece of equipment was a halftrack, with a searchlight on the front and a machine gun on



the rear. They turned the searchlight and machine gun on us and fired for what seemed like an eternity. They finally left after they were convinced, we were all dead, they never came to check us. After playing dead for about fifteen minutes, I finally raised my head to make sure they didn't leave anyone behind. My entire Squad was killed, again with me as the lone survivor.

I made it back to our front lines but couldn't talk for several hours from being in shock. I was finally able to tell the officers where we were and what happened. This information was passed on to the Air Force and the German position was destroyed the next day.

On somewhere around D-Day plus 9 I was again in Hedgerow fighting. The Germans were on one side, and we were on the other. I took a bullet right through the top of my helmet. I was never so happy to be short. Later on, that day, I was climbing over another hedgerow, when a German sniper pointed his rifle right at my face. As I tried to turn to get out of the way, he fired and again hit me in my right arm.

I never saw combat again after this wound. I was sent to a hospital in Cardiff Wales. I was operated on twice over a period of five months, but the wound never healed correctly. I was then sent back to the States for a final operation.

Shortly after being released from the hospital, I received a Purple Heart Medal and was honorably discharged.

I don't regret a single moment of service to my country. I am extremely pained and saddened by the tremendous loss of life on both sides. I hope all of you will remember the sacrifices made by everyone who lived, fought and died to preserve the freedom that we enjoy today. I am deeply honored to be chosen as the Grand Marshall of the 2006 Memorial Day Parade.

*Donated by John and Rhonda Salge, and Philip Scaglione*