

THE LANDING AND NORMANDY

On June 3, 1944, a hell of a hot sultry afternoon, we left Cardiff's Heath Camp for the Cardiff Docks. Dressed in cotton underwear, long johns, 1 pair of wool socks, 1 pair of wool impregnated socks, wool O.D. uniform, impregnated fatigue uniform, impregnated shoes, field jacket, full field and rain coat, we marched 5 miles through Cardiff, Wales and melted to a stop at the dock area in an aroma surpassing any known odors! The Batteries Headquarters, A, B, and Service, filed aboard the SS Charles C. Jones (MT 209) and C Battery boarded the SS Charles D. Poston (MT 210). Clutching our sack lunch, we learned our assignments, explored the Liberty ship, and found our howitzers and vehicles already waiting for us. After satisfying our curiosity as much as possible, we bedded down for the night on the steel decks and in the holds. Daylight, June 4th found us en route from the Dock area to Barry Bac, Wales. It was on the beach of this some bay that we three days ago had tested our water proofed vehicles. The reasons for those tests began to dawn on some of us with new seriousness. We remained here until early morning June 6th, 1944.

Wales and England slipped out of view by late afternoon. On the morning of June 8th, after a relatively peaceful channel crossing, we steamed into Utah Beach off the Cotentin Peninsula, France... Here the battle was raging. Destroyers patrolling the beach were constantly shelling the shore line and bluffs, battleships loosed salvos that caused all of us to shudder. The ship to our left buckled at the sound of a terrific explosion and disappeared in twenty seconds time. We saw water spouts from enemy shell fire rising all about us – the bulks of sunken ships – the dismal stacks of a ship protruding above the water – a half-sunk destroyer still firing on the enemy shore installations. We watched a fortified French village crumble away to rubble under the severe pounding of the battleships Texas and Nevada. On the beach, troops and equipment unloaded and vanished between the mysterious explosions.

With night came the enemy planes. They strafed and bombed the beach and harbor, illuminating the hundreds of ships and the sausage like balloons overhead. Anti-aircraft fire laced the sky, our ships' machine guns fired overhead. In the midst of all this excitement, an explosion occurred which rocked the SS Jones three quarters out of the water. Everyone bolted from their stations. "Hit a Goddamn mine" – minutes passed like years, life preservers were at a premium. Finally, as nothing more happened, we relaxed.

We unloaded. The worries, the fears, the sweat of the men who did the job will never be fully appreciated. The 13/ton tractors and 6/ton Howitzers were swung overboard and lowered to the LCT's. The gun crews, drivers, wiremen, and the rest of us climbed down rope ladders and boarded the landing craft as our vehicles were loaded. Earlier our reconnaissance parties had landed. Many of their vehicles were stranded beneath the water. Some are still on the Normandy beach. Our "Recon" parties guided us safely into position as we came inland, and the journey was packed full of exciting moments – mined roads, snipers, planes, and the dead.

June 9th, 1944, near Loutres, France, we fired as never before. In action supporting the attack by the veteran 82nd Airborne Division, our first combat efforts were rewarded by the many expressions of gratitude and appreciation from fighting men of the 82nd. To be complimented, sincerely, by veterans like those was the highest award we could ever hope for. Their praise was above any official reward – and we had so soon proved ourselves worthy!

In Normandy, the marks of war were harsh: the dead had not been removed – puffed bodies and bloated animals lay in the ditches, and the fields. A stench that didn't jibe with the apple blossoms and flowers persisted. The Chaplain always had a large congregation. God was wanted then.

On June 9th, we made our first displacement to a position near Ste. Mere Eglise. The night of June 12th we received our worst visit from the Luftwaffe. Enemy planes attacked our positions relentlessly, dropping flare after flare; no place escaped illumination. The diving roar of the planes, the sound of the bombs, the terror of the unknown will never be forgotten. During the attack we suddenly realized that we were not as well dug in as we should have been. We had to have fox holes – covered fox holes – a hard lesson had been learned. This was not maneuvers. For one week we remained in that position, firing while our doughboys and forward observers got their worst taste of combat in the jungle-like hedgerow warfare. Multi-colored parachutes, parachute equipment, and broken-backed gliders lay in our fields and the fields around us. Kraut equipment and ammunition was there also – abandoned in haste. We learned a whole hearted respect for our tough paratroopers as we saw them coming in singly or by pairs through the enemy lines – many times with valuable information. Our foxholes were lined with silk parachutes in those days.

From Ste. Mere Eglise our trail led to Amfreville, Orglanders, and across the peninsula to St. Sauveur Le Vicomte. The march to St. Sauveur was another night ride. Up north of us Cherbourg still held out but was being slowly cut off. The 357th combat team to which we were attached was to guard the rear of the troops advancing on Cherbourg and to prevent any Germans from escaping. Many Krauts did try to get out of the trap, but they were caught by our troops. We ourselves were constantly on the alert. In the distance there was a constant rumble of artillery and bombing as Cherbourg fell – piece by piece.

Occasionally in the daytime there would be a fast low-flying Heinie plane over the area going towards Cherbourg. In a few minutes he'd usually be back with twelve P47's on his tail.

On June 29th we moved again to positions near Beuzeville-la-Bastille. The peninsula was ours, and we were gathering for the big push. We were veterans now, fox holes with covers were automatic; Howitzers went down, and nobody opened up on “Bed Check Charlie”, the one Kraut plane which droned nightly overhead. We talked a little French, accepted their bouquets like heroes, and were still looking for the “Cokes and Zippos” that had gone to the armed forces. We heard that Rita Hayworth in “Cover Girl” was the favorite of the Normandy Battlefront,

Crossing the swollen Seves River at midnight, we looked to the right and left and saw the geysers of war spurt up as the Kraut artillery ranged in on the bridge.

This was the position where our doughs took Beau Coudray and Foret de Mont Castre, and proved themselves the best doughfeet in the world. In the forest the radio operators and instrument men carried their equipment up Hill 122 through woods and undergrowth that could rival the best jungles of the South Pacific.

The Engineers cut a path through the forest, it was impossible to get a jeep through, but they made it. And once again Jerry took a terrific beating from our guns. This also was the position where we got our first-quarter master bath – right out in the backyard of Gorges, buck naked – 2 minutes to wash and 2 minutes to rinse!

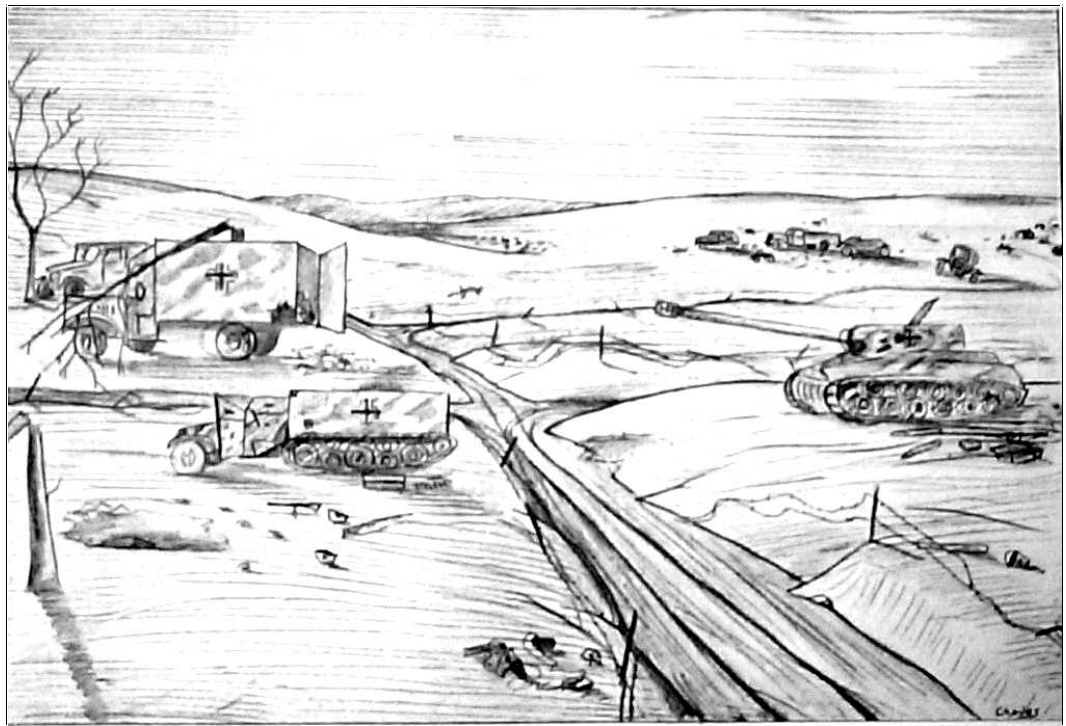
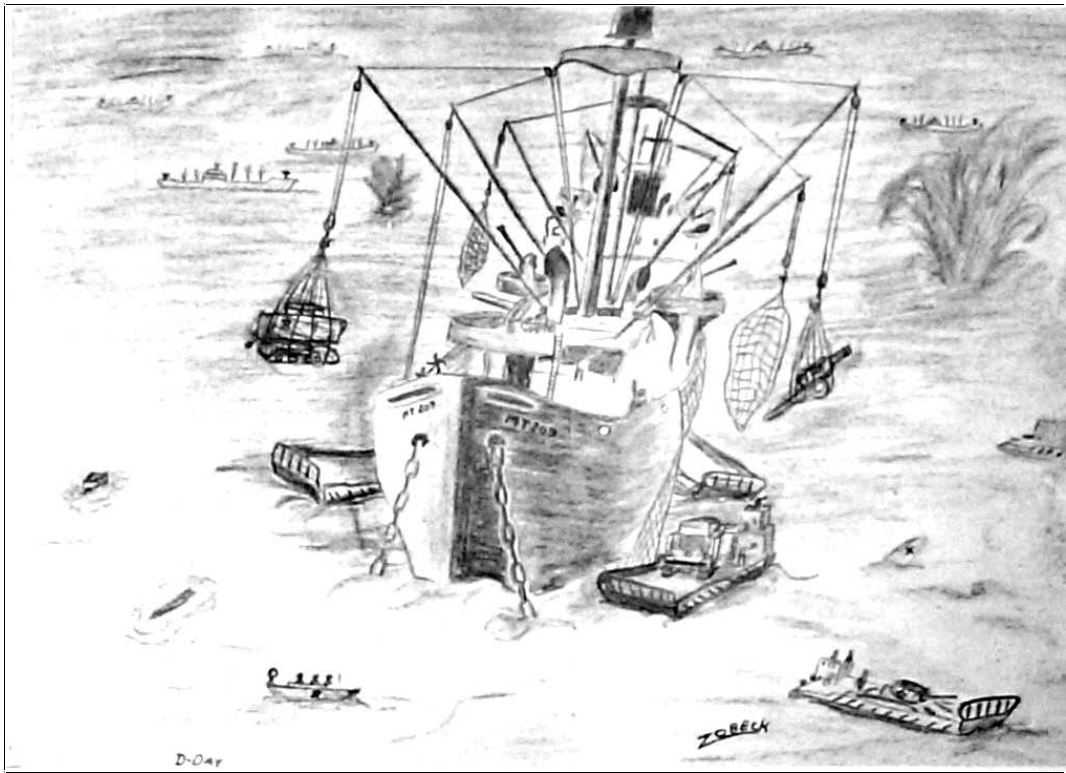
Jerry shelled us plenty, but to no avail ... remember the burned-out tanks, the fried spuds, the wine and cognac?

On July 14th, we moved to La Plessis where Able and Baker Batteries witnessed the construction of an airfield. "Gad, how the bulldozer drew fire!" Here Jerry pasted us with unbelievable accuracy.

On reconnaissance for our next position, near Gorges, our advance parties were strafed, and as our batteries came into position, they were severely shelled. The Heinie artillery whistled in relentlessly. Shells kicked up dust and dirt in nearby fields, but miraculously no one was hurt. In this position, we all encountered the heaviest and most constant shelling the Jerry had yet given us. Message Center, the medics, and "A" Battery were special targets. An unusual number of duds came in. Later the engineers found them filled with sawdust.

On July 28th, the Germans had enough. We lost contact with them and ended up at Cathelmais. We did not fire during our stay here, but prepared for the chase to come. We listened avidly to news broadcasts, put up our situation maps, cleaned our equipment and went on foot marches. Our only enemy activity here was "Bed Check Charlie", and the German propaganda leaflets: "Hey Kid, Why miss all this and let that 4'er run around with your wife?" Pretty racy looking wife too!





FALAISE POCKET

So we waited in our positions at Cathelmaais chafing at the bit to join the chase which we knew, by the radio news, was going on. We know also that, although we were not in the war, others were; for waited saying the 6th and 4th Armored Division's streaming down the Normandy highways to Brest. What a site they were! Mile after mile of Shermans and half tracks, thousands of machine guns and mobile cannons ready to chase the Krauts clear across France.

During our brief rest we looked around us and realized that this Normandy we had been fighting in was beautiful when you had time and inclination to look around. However we were not to rest long. The 2nd of August found us on the road again. The highway to Avranches was the best that we had seen so far. Scattered along the road were German tanks and vehicles, evidence of the swift passage of our armor. At one point near La Haye-Pesnel the battalion column was forced to detour around the muzzle of a Panther tank which was squarely in the middle of the road. General Patton was on the road that day, and as he passed the column some of us got our first glimpse of our Army Commander.

As we passed down that long straight highway we wondered about the mighty German Luftwaffe. Where was it? Except for fast-moving reconnaissance planes and occasional hit-and-run ground attacks we had seen nothing of the German Air Force in the daytime. The few planes that did get through our air cover were kept away from us by our own anti-aircraft outfit, the 537 AAA (AW). C Battery of the 537th had been attached to the battalion and we were happy to have them. Those Bofors and multiple 50's looked mighty good to us and we welcomed the additional fire power of Captain Joe Levin's outfit.

The 345th halted at the little town of La Charrurie 11000 meters east of Avranches for the afternoon of the 2nd and moved again that evening to positions near its base Le Bourget. The march to Le Bourget was made from 2200 to 0115 on a beautiful moon-lit night. The sound of enemy planes and the sight of the crisscrossed tracer streams reaching up into the sky are memories that are forever in minds of the men who were riding on they trucks that night. The battalion reconnaissance parties sweated the batteries out as they saw the occasional shadow of a bomber in the sky and heard the distant chatter of strafing attacks and the answering machine gun fire. The Battalion rolled in safe as usual led by Major Guthrie, map in hand and standing on the running board of his command car.

At chow time the men gathered around the kitchen truck to eat and listen to the radio. We learned that the armor was racing across the base of the Brest Peninsula practically at will, that German resistance had broken. On August 6th the battalion moved into position near St. George Butavent under cover of darkness in support of the newly formed Task Force Weaver (our assistant Division Commander). The task force was split into two parts under General Weaver and Colonel Barth, CO of the 357th Infantry, and was directed to proceed by two routes to seize Le Mans as quickly as possible: The 345th received the mission of direct support artillery for Task Force Barth. Our route of advance was to be Mayenne, Monteur, Ste. Suzanne, Bernay, Chauffour Notre Dame, Le Mans. We were to overcome or by-pass any resistance. Thus began one of the most interesting actions of our history.

En route from Gorges to the position area south of Connmer three ME 109's strafed the battalion column just as A Battery was turning off the road. This was the first experience of its kind the battalion had. We were getting into the spirit of a fast moving situation and enjoyed it after this slow moving, slugging war in Normandy.

We moved into position and prepared for a goodnight's sleep after eating our evening K ration. The 1st Battalion was already way ahead and the 2nd Battalion of the 357th was moving up behind us. Colonel Norris, Major Salisbury, Captain White, and Lt. Sheely were up ahead in the town of Ste. Suzanne, arranging for close artillery support with Colonel Barth. Everyone was feeling very secure that night, with an infantry battalion in both the front and rear, even though there was a rumor in B Battery that some Kraut soldiers were hiding in a farmhouse nearby.

Suddenly a machine gun cut loose from the edge of a woods about 800 yards in front of the battalion position. A perimeter defense was formed and B Battery evacuated their tractors from the open field in front. General McLain, the Division Commander, when he attempted to go forward on the road through the battalion position, was halted by the same machine gun fire so he returned to confer with Captain Tetzlaff, the A Battery commander. Just as Captain Tetzlaff was organizing A Battery to overcome the resistance, the 2nd Battalion came down the road and took over. It was decided that the 2nd Battalion and the 345th would stay in position for darkness was falling and we would continue the march in the morning when the amount of resistance could be determined.

In the morning the advance was resumed on the road to Ste. Suzanne where the advance party was engaged in confused fighting with German Infantry and tanks. Our plan was to put the 345th in position just south of the town, but as the head of the column reached a point 100 yards from the town the reconnaissance party ran into shell fire. High velocity fire was falling on the road ahead and on each side. Major Guthrie halted the battalion and General McLain gave orders to go into position and start shooting. The Major immediately turned the batteries over to the battery commanders. Within fifteen minutes after receipt of General McLain's order, the battalion was in position and ready to fire. This occupation was one of the fastest and most efficient ever accomplished by the battalion and came at just the proper moment: for the infiltrating German tanks had created a most critical situation in Ste. Suzanne. These tanks had direct observation on all movements across the main square of the town; so our tank force was completely stymied. Lt. Clark, B Battery observer, took up a position on the high ground north of town while Lt. Everett went forward into Ste. Suzanne to obtain observation on the tanks.

Meanwhile, Captain Swift, B Battery Commander, climbed a tree and discovered the enemy tanks approaching the town from the southwest. He immediately took them under fire, The rounds chased the tanks into the thick woods where many battalion volleys were dumped on top of them. Four fires were started by these rounds. Several more fires were started when Lt. Clark spotted the tanks attempting to get out and again fired the same concentration from his OP. We never ran into the tanks after that. Lt. Lilly fired on tanks and infantry in the same general location from his air OP. As soon as the tank threat was definitely over, we displaced to the vicinity of St. Symphorien, and from there to Bernay.

As B Battery left St. Symphorien it was dusk and difficult to see, both for the men in the rear of the column and for the Heinie truck that pulled up to the last vehicle as the column started to move, It was a case of mistaken identity and all around and what happened is not clear even to Sgt. Beacham, Cpl. McKeon, Sgt. Roberson, and the rest of B Battery involved. However, since the battery was moving out someone threw a hand grenade as the trucks moved. No doubt was left in the minds on the Germans that we did not want them in our column.

The Bernay position was occupied around midnight; strong guards were put out on the crossroad around which the battalion was drawn up in the form of a square. That night, while the headquarters battery wire crew was laying wire, Pfc. Grimes stopped a vehicle, which was about to run over a wire

which Sgt. Beauchamp and his crew were laying across the road. Grimes waved the vehicle to a stop and picked up the wire so the truck could pass. As the vehicle passed he realized what he had done – the vehicle was a German ambulance.

Early the following morning the advance continued with the 1st Battalion in the lead. Lt. Crabtree, Charlie observer, was with C Company following the lead tank when they reached the road junction at Chauffour Notre Dame. Lt. Lilly and Lt. O'Connor, our liaison pilots, had reported a large amount of enemy traffic on the LeMans-Laval highway; so the 1st Battalion deployed to protect the junction and ambush any Krauts trying to escape. Our pilots were continuously in the air acting as the eyes and ears of the column scouting flanked roads and territory far in advance of the head of the column. They reported many vital bits of information. Both Lt. Lilly and Lt. O'Connor deserved the Distinguished Flying Cross they later received for their work.

As German tanks and vehicles approached the crossroad, Lt. O'Connor took them under fire. Lt. Crabtree and Captain Huckaby, in position at the crossroad, kept in contact with the plane as the pilot crept the rounds into within 50 yards of their position. The tanks were knocked out or disbursed. Through the combined efforts of our own tanks and artillery the highway was littered with German vehicles. This was a sample of what was to come later at Chambois.

The drive continued to LeMans where the column turned North toward Falaise to meet the British who were driving south to meet us. We had broken through the enemy lines and were now in rear of them. All that remained for us to do was cut off and annihilate the German 7th Army. The Krauts now had their once favorable situation reversed on them. A few days before, they had threatened to cut us off by capturing Mortain in our rear, and attempting to drive on to Avranches to thus split the 1st and 3rd Armies. They failed, but we would not.

At Alencon the 345th had its second bombing while in the position area. We were awakened at midnight by the noise of planes and looked up out of our foxholes to see the sky so bright with flares that we could read a fine print newspaper by it. Lord, how conspicuous we felt. Each bomb sounded like it was going to land right on top of us but again we came through without injury.

On the 15th of August we moved into position near Nonant le Pin. The next day the 90th Division doughboys moved in to close the final escape gap of the German 7th Army. In the afternoon a heavy battle raged at Le Bourg St. Leonard, and Lt. Efav fired our battalion until the last minute as A Company of the 359th Infantry was forced out of town. The 345th poured volley after volley into the town to stop any further enemy advance. The Germans were trying desperately to hold an escape route open. Already the passage had been narrowed to a few miles, and General Eisenhower in his historic order of the day had called on the allied ground, sea, and air forces to close the gap and liquidate the enemy. From the ridge east of the Le Bourg St. Leonard our OP's had a beautiful view of the valley through which the remnants of the 7th Army were driving to escape. Continuous artillery fire fell as routed Germans tried first one road then another in full view of the OP. Most roads were blocked either by our own infantry or by knocked out tanks, vehicles, and artillery. German columns out of touch with the situation would frequently drive right into our lines; and many sharp clashes resulted. Tank destroyers, adjusted by our own battalion observers, Lieutenant Efav, Everett, and Goulko, fired point-blank at the bewildered panzers.

The wreckage and devastation of the "The Pocket" evades description. In the final stages it was artillery that completely mangled the frantic breakthrough attempt, while the infantry frustrated any escape. On the 17th of August, it was all over. Those of us who went down to view the remains of the

Army, were overwhelmed by the ruins. British Tommies were there visiting the battlefield also, and it was our first glimpse of our British allies since we had left England.

By now the war had left us behind and had moved on with our swift advancing armored columns to Chartres, Fontainebleau, and Paris itself. We had a few days of well-earned rest as the British went by on the coast route. Then it was off across France for us. Our trail passed through Sees, Mamers, La Ferte Bernard, Chapelle-Royale, Malesherbes, to Fontainebleau where we bivouaced for the night of August 26th in the historic forest of Fontainebleau. We were bypassing Paris, much to our disgust. Early in the morning of August 27th we crossed the Seine River and moved by bounds to follow the advance of the 357th Infantry through legendary Châteaux Thierry to Cormicy, near Reims.

