

II -- ADJUSTING TO THE COMBAT ZONE

"After we boarded the LST's at Portland Harbor, the boat I was on bumped against the one next to it making a big gash in the side. I was afraid we might sink. The crew spent much of the day welding steel beams and plates over the hole." --- Francis Neighly

"It was dark when we loaded on the LST's. In the morning we could see ships all around us. Barrage balloons, anchored to each ship by a long cable, were high overhead to keep the Germans from strafing us. Some of the fellows were leaning over the rail looking down at a big hole in the side of the ship." ---Frank Lankford

"How well do I remember seeing white cliffs far in the distance as we sailed across the Channel for France. LST's were all around us. There were barrage balloons attached to most of them." --- Tom Haynie

"When we left England it was early in the morning. There was a large war ship of some kind sailing out to the left of us. Large balloons or dirigibles, some 200 to 300 feet in the air, were attached to the LSTs by a thick cable. One of the sailors told me they were to prevent enemy planes from strafing us.

"I recall when the LST stopped and dropped anchor. It was dark and you couldn't see very well so I dozed off again. Then someone awakened me and said we were going ashore. When we got to the edge of the gangplank I stopped. Someone gave me a shove and said 'Keep going'. I thought we were going to step off into water but when we stepped off onto dry land I got the surprise of my life. We then ran up the beach a short distance and waited for the section truck. By this time it was getting light and you could see many LSTs lined up along the beach with their bows on dry land. I learned later they would have to sit there until the tide came in and raised them up so they could return to England. When the truck arrived we all got in and someone said: 'I don't know whether I'm cold or scared but I'm shaking like hell.'" --- Elbert Custer

I suppose we all had mixed emotions as we left England and crossed the Channel aboard the LSTs. It was still dark when we landed at what we learned later was Utah Beach. I drove one of the gun trucks off the craft. White paper was strung out marking both sides of the route we were to follow across the beach. We had to zig-zag around some deep bomb or shell craters.

--- John Hix --

"I well recall our first assembly area after we left Utah beach. Someone was trying to burn a dead German soldier that was there. There were also a number of dead horses in the area. Several of us went scouting around and in a nearby clump of woods found three badly decomposed German bodies. One was sitting in a slit trench and the other two were lying on the ground a short distance away." --- Elbert Custer

"The second day we were in France I was told there was a dead German soldier in the field next to us (Sv Btry) and that I was to get the number of his dog tags.

"Someone had already set fire to the body according to the instructions we had received in England. To reach the dead soldier I had to go around a fence or hedgerow. When I did I was downwind and had to approach the burning body with the smoke blowing in my face. It was a stench the likes of which I had never smelled before. It was a long time before I finally got that smell of burning flesh out of my nose. The worst part was that it always seemed to be most predominant at meal time." --- Frank Lankford

"One night, not long after we had landed in France, "Hq" Btry moved into an assembly area. We had just arrived when a plane - which we assumed was German - dropped a flare and lit up the entire area. All I could see was trucks. There must have been hundreds of them. It looked like the entire Division was assembled here.

"When the flare was dropped everyone got nervous for all these trucks would be a choice target. I was certain something terrible was going to happen so I quickly began to dig a foxhole that would be deep enough for me to be well below ground level. After digging for a while I became so exhausted I had to stop. I didn't think a person could get so tired. I decided to lie down for a few minutes then dig some more. I don't believe I was all the way down until I was asleep. When I awoke the sun was shining. Nothing had happened." --- James Trestik

"At some point during our first few days in France, "B" Btry bivouaced in a wide gully. Thick vines covered with small yellow blossoms were on both sides of the gully, hemming it in like a fence. Soon after we arrived countless tiny birds seemed to come out of nowhere and were fluttering all around us." --- Tom Haynie

"At the end of that long night and day march we made a few days after we arrived in France (Le Gue' Bottrel to Vaige), "B" Btry went into position at the foot of a hill. I don't think we registered or fired any missions from there. Soon after we arrived, however, a half track pulled up adjacent to us and proceeded to fire round after round all night long. We didn't get much sleep for the second night in a row." --- Tom Haynie

"During our first few weeks in France it seemed that the population of every town and village through which we passed was out in full force enthusiastically waving and shouting: 'Vive la France, Vive la Amerique.' For the most part we responded with the same praises. I remember getting bored with the constant repetition and began yelling: 'Vote for Willkie.'

"Going through one of the farming villages I got a real shock. In response to my 'Vote for Willkie', a voice, in a clear British accent, came from the back of the crowd inquiring: 'Vote for whom.' --- John Beard

"One of the things that stands out vividly in my memory was my first night of guard duty. It was very early in the morning, just before daybreak. My post was at the bottom of a hill at a gate where the battery had turned in off the road. There was a large old tree there with many roots sticking up out of the ground. I sat on one of the roots and while my body knew I was in France, my mind was back in the USA.

"As I sat there I looked up at the skyline in the dim early light and thought: 'If someone came over that hill I sure could mow them down'. It seemed that I had no sooner thought that when something did come over the crest of the hill. It looked like someone walking all crouched over. I watched it for a few seconds before the gravity of the situation struck me. My hair stood on end; my heart jumped up into my throat. I tried to holler 'Halt!' but the word would not come out. I thought to myself: 'I'll wait until you get down to that certain spot then I'll start shooting.' Just as it got to the spot I had selected, it turned sideways and I saw it was a cow.

"As I composed myself I found that I was standing on the root on which I had been sitting. Sweat was running down my face and back. The stock of my carbine was slick from my sweating hands. My first night of guard duty in the combat zone scared the hell out of me." --- Elbert Custer
