

Adjusting to the Combat Zone

On Aug. 4, 1944, the 314th boarded LST's 372 and 515. The convoy departed Aug. 5 at 0600, had a slow, uneventful 82 mile crossing of the English Channel, and arrived at Les Dunes De Villa Varres (Utah Beach). The Battalion cleared the beach on a roadway that had been bulldozed through the sand dunes and proceeded to Transit Area B, a bivouac area near St. Jores.

John Ruyan (Btry Exec., Ln. O.) says: "I remember very well loading at the docks at Portland, leaving the coast of England and then debarking on the shores of France. For this midwesterner who had never traveled more than several hundred miles from home, the sea was a fascinating experience. I watched bewildered when the bow of the LST dropped onto the French shore. Then we rolled our trucks and guns right out the ramp onto the hard sand of the beach. I looked back and saw this huge ship beached on dry sand. How would it get off? Then a veteran sailor told me that the crew had to await the incoming tide before floating out to sea again. To a landlubber, landing on a beach in France without getting our feet wet was phenomenal. But the grim reality of war soon hit us when we saw several dead GI's floating nearby in the water. This was one helluva way to spend my 25th birthday."

Elvis Mitchell (Sv Btry) likewise recalls being surprised that the vehicles could be driven off the LST right onto dry land: "That was my first experience with ocean tides coming in and going out." But not everyone was awed by the enormity of the occasion. Eli Miller (C Btry) says he was "chewed out" by Major Bailey Carnahan (Bn. Exec.) as he was leaving the LST because, not only was he the last one off, but he was invading Europe armed only with his messkit. Likewise, Francis Neighly remembers: "The morning we were to debark, I went to the area where the trucks and guns were coupled, but the ramp doors hadn't been opened yet so I went upstairs to get my breakfast. There were some Navy men there from my home town, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and they said: 'Neighly, if you don't want to walk, you had better get your posterior downstairs in a hurry. They have just opened the doors and will be getting those trucks out of there fast.' I ran back down and just barely made it."

Frank Lankford (Su. Off. Sv Btry) remembers how "the Navy men kept yelling to get the trucks off. I found my truck and driver just as they dropped the ramp that let us go from the upper to the lower deck and drive off. One of the ship's officers told a man standing by another truck 'to move that damned truck.' He replied that he wasn't the truck driver. The officer yelled, 'You are now. Get the hell in there and drive off.' He had never driven a big truck before but, with some grinding of gears, he did then."

"I well remember our landing on Utah Beach," says Russell Litchfield (Bn. Amo. Off. -- Sv Btry). "When awakened at 0430 and told to get breakfast and be in their trucks at 0545, many drivers assumed this was a typical 'hurry up and wait' exercise. Not so! Lots of drivers didn't get to drive their vehicles onto the continent and found themselves, instead, running with others along the roadside, messkits clanking, all three miles to the assembly area."

However, some were on the ball. William Wilkinson (Hq Btry) recalls: "When we were getting ready to land on French soil, my foresighted drivers

helped themselves to all of the extra food that was readily available on the LST's. So, we ate pretty well for a long way across France."

"Just after we rolled off the LST," says William Dorsch (Hq Btry), "I noticed a poppy blooming on the roadside and wondered if it had anything to do with the popular WWI song. Also, one of the first buildings I saw had an exact replica of a SOHIO gas station sign. I wondered if we were there to get Standard Oil back for Old John D."

"Each vehicle," according to Michael Heneghan (B.C. -- B Btry), "was driven off to the assembly area. The drivers had a numbered card and when they reached road intersections, they'd show their number and an MP would direct them the right way. The distance was only about 3 miles and we all got there about 0730. Then we moved to a bivouac area some 16 miles away and arrived there about 0930."

Mike remembers that first area. "There was a dead German soldier in the field. This was the first time any of our men had seen an enemy, dead or alive. The body had started to decompose and in the excitement, someone poured gasoline on the corpse and set it on fire." He recalls very vividly telling the men to smother the fire, dig a hole, and bury the fellow.

"The first night in France," John Beard (FO -- Ln. O.) recalls, "'C' Btry had moved into a large field which was surrounded by trees. It was very dark. We were all apprehensive, if not outright scared, not knowing what to expect. Not long afterward a plane flew over and dropped a flare lighting up our bivouac like it was high noon. Furiously digging our foxholes deeper, we nervously waited for something terrible to happen -- bombing, strafing, artillery fire. We waited and waited and after what seemed an eternity, the sun came up and our spirits rose with it."

The general feeling of uneasiness was also recalled by Bill Wilkinson, who says: "I'll never forget our first night in France, just green troupes not knowing what to expect. There was a lot of thick underbrush where we had parked our maintenance truck, so James Trestik (Hq Btry) and I strung a rope between us and worked out a code to make sure we wouldn't both fall asleep at the same time."

Manly Overstreet (Hq Btry) recalls: "The second day we were in France, I drove Col. Minahan to visit someone he knew at the 2nd Evac Hospital. Enroute I remember passing through St. Lo, which was a massive pile of rubble and still burning in places. It wasn't too difficult getting to the hospital, but on our return it was dark. When we came to an intersection the Colonel would have to get out, look at the road signs, consult his map and then tell me which way to go. I remember he said if I was sleepy he would drive, but seeing for the first time the sights of war and the still smoldering villages, I was anything but sleepy."

On Aug. 8, the Division began moving to the forward assembly area west of Le Mans and for the next few days the Battalion moved in a southeasterly direction, bivouacing in a wooded area near Le Gué Bottrel on the first

night. The route passed through or near St. Jores, Periers, Coutances, Gavray, Villedieu, and Brecey.

During one of the brief halts along the highway, one of our forward observers, who wishes to remain anonymous, made a bee line for a small clump of trees some 40-50 yards off the road, dropped his pants, and quickly assumed a squatting position. Hearing voices, he looked up and saw a man and three girls approaching over a slight rise just beyond the trees. When they saw our man, they let out a shout, ran down and then shook his hand while he was still helplessly engaged in the activity for which he had chosen this presumably private spot. After these formalities, the man and the girls, with many "Vive la France," and "Vive la Amerique," hurried out to the road to greet the other Americans. Our observer, unfamiliar with the blasé French attitude toward the performance of nature's necessities, returned to his jeep red-faced from his first culture shock.

On this same move, James Benford (B.C. -- Sv Btry) had an interesting encounter. "Movement along the road had been very slow. It was one of those 'stop-wait-go' moves. Once while we were stopped, I heard a vehicle coming up from the rear trying to pass the column. Naturally, I wondered who this might be. When the vehicle came alongside, I saw that it was another command car. Just after it passed my vehicle, it stopped suddenly and backed up opposite me. An officer got out and came over to speak with me. It was Lt. Col. DeLoss Barber, the 314th's first battalion commander. At that time he was commanding the 256th FA Bn., a separate Corps battalion. We talked for a while and then he went on. I never saw him again."

After leaving Le Gué Bottrel at 2200 on the 8th, the Battalion made a night march of 70 miles through Montigny, St. Hilaire, Fougeres, Ernee and Montsurs and arrived three miles west of Vaiges at 1130 the next morning.

Mike Heneghan vividly recalls that night march. "I was riding in my command car following the last vehicle in 'A' Btry. We had to keep pretty close in order to be able to see the cat-eyes on the vehicle in front of us. There were times during the night when I had to lay out on the hood and waive my white handkerchief so that Russell Simpson, my driver, would know whether to move right or left. Sometimes, he was on the very edge of the road."

John Ruvan recalls: "We were making a long night march when the Germans bombed St. Hilaire or one of the nearby communities. Our Battery, 'B' was stopped in the middle of a town which was aflame and almost completely destroyed by the bombing. On our right AA guns were blasting away at the departing bombers. This, to my knowledge, was our first experience witnessing or hearing gunfire in the combat zone."

The sound of enemy fire was not the only first for the 314th that night. John remembers: "Lt. (Lloyd) Bloomer (Exec. -- A Btry) and I, together with our drivers, stood beside our vehicles conversing in very low tones and observing the burning buildings and the eerie atmosphere of a destroyed village. Out of the darkness appeared a shadowy figure mumbling something, which we later learned was German. It was a young German bomber pilot who had been shot down. He appeared to be slightly wounded and came forward to give

himself up as a prisoner. Lt. Bloomer had the distinction of disarming the man. To my recollection, he had a flare pistol in a knee pocket of his flying suit. The excitement in our small group was intense. Our first encounter with the enemy. In reality, I don't know to this day who in the hell was more frightened, the German prisoner or our group of greenies."

Mike Heneghan remembers the same incident: "I was sitting in my car when a German came out of the field. I assumed he was a German flyer who had been shot down and was afraid to go into a nearby town because he thought the French people would kill him. So he had waited in the field, or somewhere, and came walking out with his hands up as we were passing. He was well dressed, I remember. When the soliders in the last vehicles in "A" Btry and the first vehicles in "B" Btry saw him, all I could hear was everyone loading a round into his carbine. This was the first live enemy they had ever seen, and he wanted to surrender very badly. I remember I jumped out and pushed him onto the tailgate of the last truck of "A" Btry. A short distance further, we rounded a curve and came to the first town, St. Hilaire. AN MP was directing traffic and I think Lt. Lloyd Bloomer jumped out, took the prisoner, and turned him over to the MP. We kept going. I don't think the MP wanted the guy any more than we did."

Simeon Hutcheson (A Btry) also recalls that night march. "We had just left the bivouac area and had not gone very far when German planes came over, dropped flares and lit up the area where we had just been. Then the bombers came. This was the night when 'A' Battery took the 80th Divison's first German prisoner."

What we were unaware of was that the Luftwaffe was out in full strength attempting to close the break-through route, Coutances-Avranches-St. Hilaire, that 1st Army had created a week earlier (the same route we were on) by trying to knock out all the bridges we had to use. Fortunately, all the AA fire we heard was driving them off.

Excitement and fear were very evident on that night of firsts. "On that long night march, I (Elvis Mitchell -- Sv Btry) was driving for the Battery Commander. The convoy stopped briefly and we heard planes in the air and bombs and shells exploding around us. Captain Benford asked, 'What is that I hear chattering?' 'Sir,' I replied, 'that is my teeth and the brake pedal.' I was scared and shaking all over."

From Vaiges the Battalion moved on the evening of Aug. 10 to Chamnes. There it occupied a firing position and registered for the first time, but fired no missions. From Chamnes the route swung northeastward and the Battalion successively occupied firing positions at Ambriers (just northeast of Ste. Suzanne), Rouesse-Vasse, Sille Le Guillaume (Silly William to us), and Conde, then moved to a bivouac area west of Alencon on Aug. 15.

"It was at Ste. Suzanne," says Edward Scarberry (Hq Btry), "that sometime before daylight I was dropped off at an intersection as route marker to direct the convoy which would be coming along later. It was pitch black and quiet as a tomb. All alone in the dark, eerie stillness, everything imaginable went through my mind. Peering at the shadowy outlines of the buildings, I kept

thinking that there could be a sniper in any one of them and that I didn't have a chance here all by myself. As it started to get a little light, I saw some back and forth movement at one of the windows. I was certain it was a German soldier. By that time I was really 'worked up' and was wondering if I shouldn't fire first. Then I heard a rumbling noise and saw some of our tanks approaching. That bolstered my morale a lot. By the time they had passed it had gotten lighter and I saw that the figure I had seen moving back and forth was a Catholic nun. But for the timely arrival of the tanks, I might have shot her. Not long afterward a group of Frenchmen gathered at the corner and one of them offered me a drink of cognac. I sure needed it."

Frank Lankford recalls that:"At one of the places during these moves, and it might have been Ste. Suzanne, Service Battery bivouaced at night in a large field that had a fence and hedgerow around it. Capt. Benford put out a guard post at the four corners. He told the men that if there were any disturbances during the night, to do what they could to take care of it, but if it got too much to handle, that they should blow a whistle.

"Sometime later one of the guards thought he saw something and took a pot shot at it. That awakened the rest of the guards who started shooting up in the air. One of the fellows woke up in the middle of all this and, not knowing just what was going on, grabbed his rifle and yelled, 'Blow the whistle! Blow the whistle!' and started shooting too. Capt. Benford took his life in his hands by going to each guard post to quiet them down."

"One of the things that has stuck in my mind over the years," says Hubert Kenyon, "and I believe it was in the early days of August, was one night while we (the Air Section) were camped out, we heard movement of what we thought was a German patrol behind a hedgerow near us. In a few minutes all hell broke out in the Service Battery area not far from us with lots of machine gun and rifle fire. Sure learned to dig a foxhole in a hurry."

It was in this same area on Aug. 12, that Hubert made his first combat flight which lasted for 1 hour and 50 minutes but no missions were fired.

In those early days of August when many of our memories are of day and night marches, hedgerow bordered fields, and joyful Frenchmen handing out flowers, wine, and fruit as we passed through their villages, our Combat Team partner, the 318th, occasionally encountered hostile resistance from the retreating Germans. Mostly this consisted of mines or mobile road blocks composed of snipers, machine guns, 88's or similar weapons, which the infantry was able to dispose of without artillery assistance.

The first call for artillery fire came as the 318th was approaching Sille-Le-Guillaume. Since the target was not within the 314th's range, the first round fired at the enemy by the 80th Division Artillery was fired by "B" Battery, 315th FA, but was adjusted by Frederick Maxted (314th Ln. 0).

John Beard recalls that the infantry unit he was with was being transported in Corps or Army QM trucks. "As the column approached the outskirts of Sille-Le-Guillaume, we halted and a patrol was sent to reconnoiter the high ground overlooking the town. The patrol descended a hill

on our right, crossed a main (paved) road, then proceeded single file up the partially wooded hill beyond. When it was about half way up, the dreaded word 'bobby traps' was relayed back along the column. Shortly thereafter we passed the bodies of two German soldiers. One was minus both legs. They no doubt were victims of their own handiwork. Then I heard a loud explosion and cries of pain. Someone had hit one of the many trip wires and several men toward the front of the line had been struck by shell fragments. The most seriously injured was the Lieutenant who led the patrol. He was bleeding profusely from several wounds in his legs. I carried a large scimitar shaped hunting knife with a ten-inch blade, which I used to slit the lieutenant's pants legs so that his wounds could be bandaged. After the patrol completed its mission it returned to the waiting trucks. Several of the QM truck drivers had clustered around my jeep. When I took my lethal looking knife from its sheath and started to clean off the blood, eyes bugged, ebony skin paled, and drivers scattered to their trucks."

On Aug. 15, because of jammed roads and lack of space, the 80th Division was ordered to a bivouac area near Evron, 41 miles southwest. The next day the Third Army was ordered to attack north and close the Argentan-Falaise gap, using the Second French Armored Division and the 80th and 90th Infantry Division.

On Aug. 17, the 80th Division retraced its route to the north. The 314th traveled some 51 miles to the vicinity of La Maladrerie (about 9 miles south of Argentan).

