



Max Kolpas

World War II - Europe
U.S. Army
Co. B, 298th Engineer (C) Battalion
Sergeant

Max Kolpas

Veterans
History
Project
Transcript

Interview conducted
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Veterans History Project Transcript

Veteran: Max Kolpas

Rank: Sergeant

Branch of Service: U.S. Army

Theater: World War II – Europe

Unit: 298th Engineer (C) Battalion

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Interviewer: Neil O'Shea

This afternoon's Veterans History Project interview is being conducted on the afternoon of September the 19th, 2007, here at the Niles Public Library. My name is Neil O'Shea, and I'm speaking with Max Kolpas. Mr. Kolpas was born on the 28th of July, 1924, and he has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. We're honored that he made the journey in today from Wood Dale. And he has many treasured memories to share with us. And we appreciate his providing us with his memoir of service in one of the most, or the most important, battle in the European Theater. Anyway, Mr. Kolpas, when did you enter the Service?

I entered the Service in March of 1943 at the age of eighteen. I left Crane Technical High School in Chicago and entered the Army without completing my last year of high school. I was a captain in the ROTC rifle team, the recipient of the William Randolph Hearst Trophy, and medal winner in the national rifle competitions. I might add to that, upon returning home at Thanksgiving of 1945 from Europe, I went back to school on the GI Bill of Rights, completed high school in about six months, and went on to graduate Wright Jr. College and the Industrial Engineering College of Chicago.

Mr. Kolpas, was there-- so you were living on the West Side then, were you?

I was living on the Northwest Side in the Humboldt Park area.

So the Humboldt Park area was going to Crane then?

Yes.

Was there any tradition of military service in the family? Was their reason why you chose to participate in ROTC in high school?

No, the only reason that I participated in the ROTC was I did like the uniform, the rifles, guns, and shooting weaponry.

So when you-- you weren't drafted? You enlisted, did you?

I was going to be drafted; therefore I went ahead and joined up.

And you didn't mind being in the Army versus the Navy?

Well, I don't like sailing on the high seas. I like swimming. I'm really not a Navy man, when I get aboard a ship, and it starts to sway, I get seasick. I feel better having my feet on the ground, or in the air flying.

Yes.

The choice was - the Army.

Mr. Kolpas, I notice in the biographical data form that you completed for us that you were born in Lithuania?

That is correct.

I came from Europe, Lithuania at the age of nine in 1933. And then with my several years of service during the war in Europe, I actually spent eleven years of time in Europe - more than most other troops in the European Theater of Operations.

So you came to this country at the age of nine? Did you know English then, already?

No, that was a real-- I'll tell you that's a real, real rough go, entering grammar school at the age of nine.

Yes.

You start out with first grade. You have to learn the English language. When my mother, and myself, and two brothers arrived here, we spoke about four or five languages. We spoke Lithuanian, Jewish, Russian and German. Learning English really made it a bit rough. You're off to a tough start.

That's amazing, isn't? You come here at the age of nine--

Right.

And then nine years later, you've mastered English, and you're able to go to defend your new country.

Yes

It's remarkable.

In fact, I'd just like to add a few more things. My father came here in 1929 from Lithuania to get himself established. Then my mother and the three of us followed in 1933. That was during the Depression period - a pretty rough go. But their timing was just perfect. I still have my passport which has the German swastika seal or stamp on it. The fate of the Jewish people at that time was, nil, yes, nothing - they were being persecuted, wiped out. In fact, as I discussed with you a little bit earlier, I'm interested in researching some of these events. I went on to research and found out, most unbelievable in Chicago, how I ran across it, which we're not going to get into right now, but I found out that my uncle, my mother's brother, and his wife and two kids, were awoken early in the morning, they were taken out into the forest, and my aunt and the two kids awoken were just gunned down, put into a ditch or mass grave and covered with lime and earth. My uncle, his name was Herschel, a very fine man, they were in the flax business, manufactured twine, he was taken to Dachau. And I have letters from the Dachau Museum. First, they wouldn't admit that he was there. But then they did find the records and they sent them to me. He was used as a guinea pig by Dr. Mengele for medical purposes until he died.

But when we got out of Lithuania, the timing was perfect.

Yes.

So you enlisted, and you chose the Army, and then you were inducted at--

I was inducted at Fort Sheridan in Illinois. I spent approximately a week there. And then we went to Camp Rucker, Alabama, for basic training as combat engineers. And after basic training, we proceeded on maneuvers in the fields of Tennessee.

Now, when I told my parents I was an engineer in the Army, they thought I was really going to get a good education, but I can tell you one thing about the combat engineers! They're just a backup outfit for anyone who needs help, the infantry, tank corps, anybody that needs manpower, needs something built, needs something destroyed. That's what the combat engineers is all about. It's a lot of hard work with exposure to the enemy.

You're not necessarily building bridges or something, or--

Oh, yes. We're building bridges over the rivers, pontoon built bridges. And we're building Bailey bridges. We're building trestle bridges. They go up and when they're done, like on the Baileys that are made out of steel, like an erector set, we take them down to use them over and over again. Others are just destroyed after they're put up.

Yes

So, your family, they understood your reasons for wanting to enlist, to participate in the war?

No. They weren't really happy about me going into the Service for fear I'd never come back. I promised my mother when I left home and walked onto Rockwell Street and headed for the streetcar on Division St. that I was returning, and I don't break promises.

And you kept your promise.

I kept my promise.

Yes. So that was probably your-- was that the first time you were away from your American home for an extended period of time?

Yes. They were really sort of sad to get rid of me in a sense, at that time, we had our fourth new member of the family born just a few years prior. And it was a girl. They needed the room. I slept in the kitchen. I was the first one up for breakfast, the family coming in and out of the kitchen, you can't get much sleep there!

Yes.

So you-- did you find boot camp hard, or basic training?

No. I had no trouble adjusting to boot camp training. I always tried to do my best in the Service. I learned one thing quickly which is, when asked for volunteers, don't volunteer for anything! They ask you if you want to take a tour. You get in a truck and you ride around in the truck, loading and unloading the truck with coal. There's going to be a lot of work. Just don't volunteer. "If you have to do it, you do it."

Interesting!

And then after we left, Camp Rucker, Alabama, to do advanced training, we boarded a train and headed for Needles, California. And there it was, Camp Iron Mountain. We went there to specialize in desert training. The days were brutally hot, and the nights were quite cold. And there were rattlesnakes and tarantulas. There were all of those good things running around! We always had to keep our clothes on, shirts, and everything else, to keep from getting burnt by the sun.

So you were still in, you were already in the combat engineers?

Yes. This was all combat engineers.

All the time. So, you had your boot camp, or whatever, at Camp Rucker?

Camp Rucker, Alabama.

And now you're out in California?

Now, we're out in Needles, California, the Desert Training Center.

Desert Training. Yes. I wonder why they were training you in the desert.

Well the reason was--

North Africa?

North Africa, you got the right answer, and we found that out after we boarded our ships in Boston.

So you departed from Boston?

Boston, yes, and I'll tell you something funny about that departure. First of all, before boarding the ship, which was the (US AT), which was United States Army Transport, I thought that this ship was going to take us out to where we'd get on a real boat that would make it across the Atlantic. No way did I think that this thing that I was on was going to take us to Europe across the Atlantic! No, no, no, because when I came from Europe to the United States in 1933, we left from Hamburg, Germany, that was a ship! This thing was like a nothing! And it was loaded to the hilt with troops. But before they let me aboard, there was an officer taking roll, and he looked at my papers, and he said, "Oh, I see you were born in Lithuania." I said, "Yes." And he asked, "Are you are a citizen?" I said, "I'm a citizen because my parents already received their citizenship, and I was a minor, due to that, it makes me a citizen automatically." He said, "Can you prove it?" "Yes." I said, "I'll tell you what. Why don't you send me back to Chicago?" "Get on board!" He said, "That's it, you, that's it! Get on aboard the ship!"

Well, we got aboard that USS Explorer. It took us about ten days to arrive to Scotland, thank God!

Slow going.

Well, it's not that it's slow going, Neil, they zig-zag all the way across the ocean.

Zig-zag to avoid the submarines

And, then, in January, we had terrible weather. The waves were very large and high. And, unfortunately, we lost one man overboard, because as the ship was swaying from side to side, you couldn't hold on when you got to the rope, the rails. And he just went overboard, but he was dead at the time he hit the freezing water. And you couldn't stop to pick him up.

He would have died--

He would have died from the impact. The temperature of the water would have killed him, and the ship's decks are pretty high.

Were you on a convoy or more than one ship?

We were. I was just getting to that. We were actually in a one hundred and forty ship convoy. We had everything from aircraft carriers with their air planes' wings folded and tied to the decks aboard. Any kind of craft that you could think of, the thing is, you had to be very careful, because there are enemy submarines in those waters. And you can't throw anything overboard,

or do anything that would give you away. And the course was always zig-zagging. But, about on the fifth day out, we noticed a big change. Part of the convoy turned to the right, and ours straight ahead. The one that I was in went to Scotland. The other one went to North Africa.

Did you come in to Glasgow or someplace?

Yes. Actually, you're right. That's where it was, and there were some people to meet and greet us there from the USO, or whatever. They gave us meat pies. I thought they were real pies! First time I ever had a meat pie. I bit into one of those and I threw the rest of it away. I'll tell you, it wasn't my thing. I thought they were fruit pies by appearance!

But, anyway, they took us over to England, and it was along the Channel, and we actually wound up in the area of Weymouth, England.

That was way in the south, right?

Oh, yes. That was right on the water.

So, was that by train, or bus, or truck?

We went by train.

By train again.

By train again.

And that's where we started our training for the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe.

So when you were with your fellow soldiers in the boat, did you have the sense of, hey, we're going over, and we're going in. I mean, did you know what was probably—no?

There was no question about it. We were stacked up like sardines. There were canvas cots; they were on racks, stacked four or five on the sides of the boats or wherever you could sleep. We knew we were there for the purpose of getting starting, and most important, of getting Hitler out of Germany.

Did you have any preference, North Africa, England, did it make any--

I didn't care if it was North Africa or England, but I didn't care to go to the South Pacific. I felt that, coming from Europe, I know what the climate is like.

Yes.

And the people would be more humane. And it would be a place that I could understand some of that language, so it would be easier.

The Army never tried to make use of any of your language skills or--

Oh, only on occasions where there were some German prisoners involved, but not as an interpreter, no, I was definitely selected and trained for demolition and rifle marksmanship, and teaching marksmanship in the Service.

The talent that you showed in high school with the rifling--

Yes.

That carried through and was recognized, to a degree?

It was definitely helpful and recognized by senior performance when you're on the target range. It helped me become a noncommissioned officer almost overnight. I think by the time I left Camp Rucker, Alabama, I was a sergeant and that was ninety days. God, if I had a good education and knew what I was doing, I could have been somebody else in the officer group. I came back home and that's basically what counts.

Yes.

So, that the trip over, were you-- ten days was a long time. This must have seemed like a long time?

It was a hell of a long time! A lot of seasickness, a lot of throwing up and you have throw up bags to use when necessary.

And, incidentally, this was something that just came to my mind. And you're asking good questions. We're out to sea and an unusual incident occurred. They found out that there were a lot of oranges stored aboard ship in the brig down below. Some of the men took it upon themselves to get down and help themselves to cases of oranges. Then one of the officers aboard ship from the Navy started chasing them. And they dropped the crates and knocked him down the stairs into the brig. And the next thing we heard aboard ship, and this was the first time I bring this up in a long time, is "Hear this! Hear this! Attention! Hear this! Hear this! Everyone is restricted to the ship. No one is allowed to leave the ship." Where the hell are we going to go! There's nowhere to go, anyway! You're down to about 70 ships out there, zig-zagging. But we were reprimanded for that. It was a good try. It was an unusual thing that happened aboard ship.

Restricted to the ship, yes.

Yes. Everybody's restricted to the ship.

So, in England, it's-- you probably land in January or February?

In January.

So, the weather must have been a little wet, or?

Well, the weather there is never good, even in good times.

You adjusted to the food, or?

Well, the food was still Army food. We weren't allowed to eat civilian food because of rationing. That was a real no-no! Quite restricted, some families, Bruce Robertson's group (my flame-thrower) had a few friends with him, they met someone that owned a store that sold groceries, meats, and things like that. I know they were invited over to their homes when they got a leave. And they would have dinner, eat with them, and have dinner. I, myself, never really indulged in that. I didn't care for English cooking, but the Army food, "eat all you want! But eat it. Don't leave it on your plate!"

So, when you arrived down in Weymouth, then, do you go through more training, different type of training?

Oh, yes. Once we got to Weymouth, that's where the real training begins. First, we were practicing with the use of live ammunition in everything that we did. And that started around March. Prior to that time, we would lay mines in the field for practice. They would be defused. We used blanks in the rifles during maneuvers. But from March of '44, everything was live ammunition. But then we had one terrible accident. And I happened to get involved in it. And that was the 297th Engineers had a mine-laying exercise. And the way mines are laid is you have a six by six truck basically loaded with tank mines which are about twelve inches in diameter and about two and a half inches or so in height or thickness. And there is a cover on them that is like a ring. And the fuse is in the center. And, if the ring is tipped by pressure, they'll explode. And there is a terrible blast. There are two people on the back of the truck, handing the mines out to the soldiers that are laying them in a certain sequence pattern. The sad part about it, and I didn't like the part when I first saw it, anyway, but that was your procedure, the truck driver would do the opposite in picking them up. He would put the truck in reverse procedure, try and follow the same trail in reverse.

Yes.

They would pick the mines up, hand it to the men on the truck, and they would stack them up. Well, this time it didn't work, because one of the mines was rolled over by the truck's tires and that set off all of the mines on the truck. And I have to stop and think for a moment. This incident was in the local paper in England and the *Stars and Stripes*, and things like that. We lost twenty-nine men that were killed, and eight that were injured. And our assignment in Company B, was to pick up the pieces. I can honestly say to you that what we had were gunny sacks, broom handles with nails at the end. Just to pick up the pieces all through the fields. We had even parts of their shoes with the shoelaces still in them, blown up, hanging from the trees - a terrible, terrible thing. But what happened then, the live ammunition order was lifted. They weren't going to do this anymore. You lose too many men in these practices. And then the crater was the size of a big, big bomb going off, like at the 9/11 site in New York, quite, terrible.

I can just say that if a cat's supposed to have nine lives, I've had far more. I can tell you that, truthfully.

After that, on about April the 15th, we started a huge exercise called Tiger Exercise. And that was an unbelievable operation. What happened was we were being trained to land on Utah Beach (as in Normandy). We didn't know exactly where, but there was an area in England that was set up as Slapton Sands, S-l-a-p-t-o-n, Slapton Sands. And in that area, we erected or built a two and a half-mile defense area to scale, showing the German emplacements, fortifications that were in the area that we were supposed to invade in Normandy. This was a wonder if you're looking for words, but it was so real realistic to scale. It showed the pillboxes, the roads, the minefields and even the highway signs on the roads. Because this was very, very important -- I never really realized how important it is to know where the hell you're going. Because if you don't know where you're going, you're in real, real big trouble!

But the main road that we were heading for was N13 when we got to our destination. But it showed all this laid out to scale. And then the exercise, which was called Tiger Exercise, was being started on or around April the 27th, and what we did is we went by motorcade convoy to witness the initial assault operations. We were going to storm the simulated German defense area. It was called Slapton Sands, which was the exact region, exercise operation. They told us they were going to show us some secret weapons being used. And I was really looking forward to seeing what was so secret. But as we watched this and it began with an hour barrage of shelling by US destroyers, followed by the secret weapon I just mentioned to you, which was a huge massive volley rocket launcher shelling out rockets all over the beach. Then there was follow-up by aircraft bombardment. All of this was completed on the obstacles that were there, the LCIs and the LCTs, landing craft infantry and tank, started to assault the beach. But there was only one big problem with that. One, and it's factual, documented, German torpedo boats on the other side of the channel spotted this. And they approached the training area, and they actually sank a number of our ships, leaving approximately seven hundred dead. And then they sped back to France. This was actually witnessed by our big brass, which included Dwight David Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and Montgomery, that's just a few of the eyewitnesses who saw this operation -- a terrible, terrible tragedy in loss of lives and equipment.

This was April the 27th?

It was April the 27th.

This was only-- this was within six weeks of the actual invasion, isn't it?

Six weeks, yes, that's true -- June 6th, 1944.

That was amazing.

Absolutely.

So the planning was carried on to a very precise, involved detail, to think that they recreated this German military!

This re-creation was so detailed and real that it made you feel like you were back home. And you knew where home was and you knew where the stores were, or whatever.

Yes. Your unit didn't have to build anything in that?

Oh, yes, we did. We were there for building these placements for this Tiger Exercise.

And then you viewed the Tiger Exercise?

And then we viewed it, and this is what it was.

It was so realistic the Germans actually showed up!

They showed up with torpedo boats and they sank a number of our ships. It's all documented.

You'd think the Germans would have, might have, figured out what was going on?

Well, they probably did.

But they didn't make the connection.

I don't know if they did or not.

No.

I'll tell you something. The German airplanes were taking recon of our areas, and if they didn't spot that, I sort of doubt it. I think they knew.

Because, sometimes, when you hear about, maybe we're getting ahead, but when you read about D-Day, the allies kind of faked the Germans out a little bit as to where the--

Well, they did fake them out, because they had a mock setup in another area in Calais, France. And that was the shortest distance between the English coast and the French coast. Hitler was sold on that idea that this was where the invasion forces were going to strike from.

To give you an idea, they had thirteen men selected sometime in, I think it was the beginning of May, and with one officer, they asked for volunteers, but they knew who they were going to take anyway. And as I said, I don't believe in volunteering. I learned that lesson. But I did volunteer for this. And I wanted to join that group, because I figured if you're going to go to London, that's a nice trip. Next thing is you're going to learn something that could be helpful for you in the future. But, for some reason or other, the officer in charge didn't want me. He wanted me to stay where I was.

You were already a sergeant then?

I was a sergeant, yes. Actually, there was one lieutenant, one sergeant, and the rest were enlisted men. And they were selected to go to London. I felt kind of hurt not to be selected, and I did talk to my captain about it. But he said, "No, we're making the decisions."

And what they were selected for, we didn't know beforehand. They were going to approach on H-hour right there, prior to the beginning of the invasion, as demolition men to assault the Utah Beach. Incidentally, I think it, Lieutenant Stafford and the rest of the men who I knew quite well, they all made it. And talking to them, they said it was nothing like they expected. You know, it went smooth, but the trouble was not on the Utah Beach. As I'll mention later, the problem was with Omaha Beach.

So there was this incredible exercise, yes, this exercise--

This was incredible, yes.

And then how long before you knew that it was going to be that D-Day was the 6th of June?

Well, all right now. I know you've done this before, Neil, because what you're asking.

Let me just tell you.

Please. Please.

Yes. We knew something was happening, exactly when we didn't know, but about roughly mid-May.

The first part of May, yes, the first part of May.

They took Weymouth, which was the town that we used to frequent for leaves of absence, to go out, and visit, take off, go to town, have a few drinks, beers, meet up with some of the English girls that were looking for us because they knew we had money and all that kind of thing. They liked our uniforms. Anyway, the town started ballooning. It was absolutely like when we arrived, going back to January, you could go down the streets, and the cars could be driven on the street. You could take bicycles. You could do anything, but as the days went on, more and more soldiers came to town. Before you knew it, you were shoulder to shoulder. You were squeezed in. You couldn't even get in and out, and, all of a sudden, one day, no one's there now – like the balloon burst - empty. That's the first sign that something's going to happen. Well, let me say, you're on a good point there, let me explain to you

Sure.

what happened about that time. It was about the end of May, the first part of June, they took us by truck, six by sixes, to the marshalling areas. The marshalling area was along the coast of England, not far from where we were camped. The only thing is we were in a wired, like a cyclone wired, high fence compound. You couldn't get in. You couldn't get out. It was guarded

by the MPs now. When you're going to tell someone they're going off to war, I'll tell you, they're not the happiest campers. I wasn't. I mean you're training for this. The day's going to come, but someone is going to get not only hurt, they're going to get killed. So they were pretty smart. What they would do beginning from that time on, they'd wake you up, like at ridiculous hours.

Oh, right.

1:45 in the morning. "This is it. Put your clothes on. Pack your gear. We're going to go across the Channel." Everybody is all worried and getting everything together. And they truck you out to the boats. They put you on an LCI. The LCI goes out for forty-five minutes or a half hour, returns back to the marshalling area – dry run, okay.

Wow.

Boy, that makes you bitch!

Oh!

Here I was, fast asleep. And now that they got me on a boat. They're putting me back in these compounds! They pull this on you at ridiculous hours, three, four times. You say, "Please do me a favor. Next time I get on that crazy ship, you make sure you take us to where we are going!"

Good psychology, then, wasn't it?

I don't know who figured it out. But, I can tell you, ninety-nine percent of the people aboard, wanted to get off on the other side! Well, these dry runs, they work.

On the sixth of June, we boarded an LCI and headed to our destination, Utah Beach. As darkness fell, we looked up and saw DC-4s. These are the airplanes carrying the paratroopers, gliders attached to these planes in tow, fighter planes escorting them. And then on the loudspeaker, and I did mark this down, basically it said, "Soldiers, sailors, airmen, you are to embark upon a great crusade towards which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. And I have great confidence in your courage, devotion to duty, and skill in battle. Dwight David Eisenhower." There's no turning back. This is it. God Bless You.

But as dawn appeared, we could see the shoreline and the skyline. There were approximately six thousand craft on the English Channel, boats of all sizes and shapes. This includes Higgins boats and everything that floats. Many of the vessels had large balloons. They're not as large as the balloons they use for advertising today -- Goodyear Tires or all of that, but they were tied by wire to the ships. And the reason for that was to keep the enemy aircraft from diving upon us while we were in the Channel. Because then they would smash up. They would have to be like kamikaze.

The US Texas was one of the large battleships, the destroyer that was doing the shelling, and, as I understand, they were using like fifteen inch-size shells -- that's three inches over a foot. That's pretty big in diameter.

But we noticed something was wrong because-- as we were getting on the Higgins boat. And I did fire at something off on the shore which I saw.

You fired a?

I fired my rifle from the Higgins boat.

It was the M1?

Yes, it was my M1. And, in fact, I learned something very, very dear. And I need to make a note of it. I thought that, going into battle, I want to get a bunch of tracers, because then I would know where I was shooting. But the only thing I didn't know, the enemy sees where the shells are coming from, and then, boom, they started firing back. So that wasn't too good of an idea. I did get rid of all my tracers. They are marked. I didn't want any more tracers.

The ropes on the LCI went down the sides, and we went down onto the Higgins boats to take us in to shore. Something drastically was wrong. This can't be Utah! Utah is flat. We went through this exercise, two and a half miles of the darn thing laid out to scale. These were cliffs that were going straight up like a wall. And there were shells, gunfire hitting the water, and our soldiers were floating on the water, dead, tanks sunk in the Channel, trucks, floating mines and tripod steel rails in the waters, all kinds of equipment. And it happened that they landed us on the wrong beach, which was the Omaha Beach.

And as the sailor put the stick down or depth gauge into the water to see what the height of the water was, he pulled it up, and he dropped the ramp, and off we went. The first fellow who went was one of the shortest guys that we had in the outfit. Tony Lamantia, probably five feet two. He disappeared. But then he bounced back up again and he started going in toward the shore.

I would say that the water was my chest in height, which was four and a half feet, five feet, roughly. And our weapons were wet, the M1, which is gas fired, operated. Couldn't use them, because the chamber had to be dry. And then we wore stiff, impregnated clothing. All the assault troops wore them. This was to keep us from getting burnt from gas warfare and so that our clothing underneath would be protected. And when we did finally get to shore, we discarded them. They were so stiff that they could stand up on their own.

Now when we hit the beach over there, the sight was absolutely gruesome. Here were our soldiers. They were twenty, twenty-one, twenty-five years of age, primarily, lying one next to another with the blue and the grey emblem on their shoulder, the Twenty-ninth Infantry Division, They're not asleep. They're dead. And we had to literally crawl over them to get up along the ridges, to get off the beach.

While this was happening, the Second and Fifth Ranger Divisions were still throwing grappling hooks onto the cliffs and scaling the cliffs, while the Germans were firing down at them. And they were dropping their potato mashers, grenades, mortars fire, and everything else onto the beaches, because on the beach there was a large alcove like where a lot of the wounded were trying to protect themselves. But as the shells came down and exploded, it didn't help them one iota.

Those poor men who were dead on the beach--

Yes?

that was because of rifle and machine gun fire?

Right.

From the placements on the cliffs?

That's correct, or they were hit in the water, and they made it to the beach and died, floated to shore.

So they were, those poor fellows, they were in a previous wave?

Oh, yes. Now, there's a big mix-up on this whole thing that I'm telling you.

Yes?

Because, even when I started thinking about this, and this Lieutenant Colonel Francis B. Robertson, was checking into this, when the 298 landed, there were supposed to be like four different echelons that landed at different times. *(His account of his father's WW II experience "Omaha Beach to Saint Marie Du Mont with the 298th Engineer (C) Battalion in France June 8-14, 1944" is appended to this transcript)* The records were a little bit confusing. And it's hard to know exactly where you're at. It could have been that is was when we saw those aircraft overhead, paratroopers ready to jump at night, the glider planes coming down, landing and crashing, that could have been, they were there before us by maybe a day. Who the hell knows, really, because you don't have a calendar that you're looking at. The only thing is, I can just tell you, we weren't far behind. It wasn't like the initial wing that came in on Utah at H- hour. There was still firing going on.

Yes.

And the Rangers weren't there just to--

But it was an absolute mistake that you were landed on Omaha? Was it they decided to keep the people there, you think?

You know what? I tell you something, Neil, you're absolutely right, because the more I started checking into this, they said that it was a possible correction by the military to take the people that were headed for Utah, bring them to Omaha, because of the big losses that they were taking. And they were even contemplating stopping that part of the invasion at Omaha Beach.

I can tell you, when I got up to the top of the cliffs, I actually had, within a day, a chance to look at their trenches. Their trenches that they had at their fortifications leading in and out of the fortifications were built way ahead of time. They had the sides covered with wood, so there wouldn't be any cave-ins. They were able to take horses that they were using to get into the fortresses and get out through these trenches. They had a step-up, where in a regular foxhole, you are in there, maybe five foot, the less you have to dig the better. But these were like seven foot deep. You could step up, so you could look out, and come back down again, and duck down again. These were amazing fortifications.

They had--they didn't need any maps as to where to shoot. It was just random shooting. They used up all the ammunition they probably could use, and they would just go from one end to the other end of the fortified, open window, and keep spraying the areas with gunfire. It was real hell. It was really, really rough.

But as you just mentioned a moment ago, it's possibly, it's very, very possible that we came there because the First Division was there, the Big Red, the number one, and the Twenty-ninth. And they were in need of help. In fact, what happened when I got up to the top, and we got ourselves pretty well organized to where we got rid of our impregnated clothing, we even threw away the gas mask, which was a mistake, because about four or five days later--

They asked you to put them on?

No, they said nerve gas, a gas attack.

Oh!

And then what are we going to do? We didn't even have them. We dumped them, and thank God it was a false attack alarm.

I went up to a Captain from the 29th, and I asked him "Captain, we're not supposed to really be here." He says, "Well, You know how to use a rifle?" I said, "Yes, I happen to be a sharpshooter." He said, "Well then, we can use you and your men. Just stay with us. Who are you with?" "298." "Well, you'll meet up with the 298th down the line," he said, "when you get to Carenton." And he was absolutely right. That's what happened.

And that captain was in?

He was with the Twenty-ninth Infantry Division.

Twenty-ninth Infantry.

Yes, we stuck with him, and he asked, "If you can use a rifle, we can use you."

About a week later, we did meet up with the 298th, as we entered Saint Maria Église. Did you ever hear that episode on Saint Maria Église in France? That's the town that had the steeple on the church. They had *The Longest Day* movie or whatever the hell it was.

Yes.

With this--

Red Buttons?

Red Buttons was the guy. Yes, you're good!

We entered that town, and that was along that route, N13. And to keep us horrified, they had a paratrooper hung on every telephone pole in the town going towards the church. Every pole had one of our boys that parachuted into town. The glider planes, of course, crashed. And they were up against trees. But the guys hopefully made it out and whatever. But that shows the first sign of the brutality of the Nazi forces in full view of the world.

Yes.

And then what happened, it was a very narrow street in Saint Maria Église, but as they were firing at us, we were on both sides of the street; we had men on the right, men on the left. And they couldn't figure out where they were getting their directions for their weapons to fire at us. And they found there was a priest in the steeple, and they shot him down, and that cut some of the shooting down.

The priest was helping the Germans, was he?

Oh, yes, he was.

It was, as I said, a terrible sight to see these paratroopers hanging on all of the telephone poles.

And then something new, hedgerow country, just right about that time, I got my first Luger. And when I reached 70 years of age I gave it to my son, Michael, who lives in Skokie, and he has it now.

Is it a good weapon?

A wonderful weapon. In fact, the numbers on there are 8868. That's the Luger number. And the way I got that weapon was we were in hedgerow country, and someone hit a German officer with a flamethrower. The German soldiers, booby-trapped him. Now I called for my 6 by 6, and we took the winch out. I pulled the winch between the hedges, came up to the officer, and I put the winch hook onto his belt. I went through the hedges to the truck. And I said, "Pull him in." Well, he blew up immediately because they had him booby-trapped. I went back in, and I got his

binoculars, and his Luger. The Luger itself was in excellent mint condition. I still have it, the two clips, everything that goes with it. The holster strap was damaged, but that's the way it is today. The Luger is perfect. The binoculars, the glass was shattered, but I just took them along. I don't think I even have the glasses anymore. I just dumped them, take up room as you move. But that was the story on my first trophy. Incidentally, I was accused of going after souvenirs, and that's a no-no! But I did my job, saving others who would be killed by blowing up the booby trap and activating the trap. Why leave a good luger behind? That's part of being a combat engineer.

But when we were at that dump, it was amazing what you can do. I took a rifle out of that dump, the first day in that dump.

This is the ammunitions dump?

The German ammunitions dump in Barfleur.

In Barfleur which you--

And I came back and I had a Mauser that was in Cosmoline. It was covered with protective grease.

A Mauser is a rifle?

A rifle, yes, a wonderful piece.

Another good weapon.

A very, very good new weapon. I took that gun, broke it apart disassembled it, put it in a box. And I said to one of the officers, "I'd like to send this home." And as long as he put his signature on it, it got home. My son has that one, too. I happen to have a sniper's one that I picked up during the war and, that one is the only weapon I really have that's of any value.

Is the sniper weapon a Mauser, also?

Yes, it's a special gun. The sniper gun, I know how I got it, but what's special about it is it's not a thirty caliber, it's a twenty-two, long rifle, beautiful.

Longer range then or--

Oh, yes, it had a sniper sight on it, everything. And someone was in a tree. After they fell out of the tree, I picked it up, so that one I sent home.

So, did you do any long range marksmanship, would you say, when you were going on these-- you made use of your own rifle skills while you were--

Yes, well I was blessed. Neil there are only four positions in firing a rifle: prone, which you almost never miss, that's when you are laying down; sitting position, which you seldom use;

kneeling; and being up, erect; and that's the hardest because you got to keep that sight and let it go where it's supposed to go. And they are accurate. I learned a few things in combat the first few nights, incidentally.

The first few nights in combat were like the Fourth of July all over again. Every night, every night, it was the Fourth, except these things that were coming down on you were real. And it lit up the sky like crazy. And you got to get used to this stuff, because you can't worry about it. I tell you, my wife does not understand me, because I'm too dumb to really worry. If you don't see anything wrong, if everything is quiet, nothing is happening, or you're dead. If you can hear it, and it's all noisy, and everything else, you're still alive. So, what the hell, what's there to worry about -- that was my theory.

Yes.

All my days of my life. Oh, I got to -- I'll tell you just one interesting thing that came up. I didn't really want to miss this. After the invasion, the first few nights we were out there with the Twenty-ninth Division, I was out with my squad in the field, and I heard a bomber. And I could tell it was German. See, the way you could tell was by the sound of the engine. Hum. Hum. Hum.

Your squad was about fifteen men?

No. Twelve.

Twelve.

Yes. I hear the bombs drop. And when you hear them squealing, you can tell just about what direction they're going in, if it's going to be a complete miss, a near miss, or if it's in your back pocket.

Look out!

I told these guys, "This is it. On your knees. On your elbows. Just breathe in and be prepared, because," I said, "this is going to really get us." They came in within about, I would say, a hundred and some yards away from us. And we're on our knees and elbows waiting, waiting, waiting, no blast, nothing happened. Morning comes, bomb disposal appears, they unscrew the cover to where fuses are to be, and there's a note in each of those bombs. I know one was a two thousand pounder and the other was a five hundred. "Compliments of the French Underground." As they loaded them on the plane, they did not put the fuses in, thank God!

Viva la France!

Viva la France! I'm telling you, I'm telling you, so help me, Lord!

That's one of those lives you mentioned!

Yes, that's one of those lives, for sure, Yes.

The only other, it's good that the war was over within about eleven months.

Yes.

From June--

May '45.

From June 6 to May the 7th, roughly, there were a couple of other incidents, and one shows the real brutality. And then I've got to follow up on that one. We were around Antwerp, Belgium, and the Battle of the Bulge started, and, later on, they tried to get our general from either the 101st or the 82nd to surrender.

McAuliffe?

Yes, McAuliffe.

Yes.

And he answered with one word, "Nuts."

Well, we happened to be near the town of Malmedy.

Oh.

I'll tell you something, that was a town that was surrounded by Tiger tanks, all kinds of German weaponry. They had some German lieutenant colonel, his name was Joachim Peiper, or something, I'm not sure exactly what his last name was. But he was written up in some of these journals that we saw and he was vicious. They captured hundreds of American soldiers. And I'm a witness to the facts. They made them remove their uniforms, undress. They slaughtered them, left them in the snow, and they took their uniforms, put them on, and took a lot of our equipment, jeeps, any other vehicle they could have. In fact, you have to be careful, even in the field, when you see airplanes coming down. Like a P51 will approach you, and you think, wow, who the hell's in there flying that plane, because it looks like he's going after you. And then he will flap his wings, you know, and give you--

Wag.

Yes, wag, and he will give you the high sign, but it can really get to you. We would have the passwords. We would, try and ask, but that killing was--there are no words that can describe how ruthless, terrible, that is. That gives you a sign when you hear about these concentration camps, I never ran across, thank God, what they could have been like.

Yes.

We had a funny incident happen around April, May of '44. We captured a bunch of German prisoners. The engineers build these prison compounds, enclosures, and we had a bunch of prisoners we captured. I was in charge of taking them to the camp. And when we got to the camp, I noticed, on this one truck, there was a German high ranking officer. And I like to collect things. When you capture them, you take a ring, a couple of medals, or decorations, or whatever. This guy had to be four by four. I mean, he was short and he was bigger than any pig I ever saw! And he had this skull hat on him, SS. And I said, "I got to get this guy." So, before they opened up the camp, I aimed my M1 at him. I had my Luger, but they couldn't see my Luger, because my Luger was in a special made holster that I had made in France. And it was for a side holster or one that is under your jacket. And I aimed it at him. And I said "Arouse." He was surrounded by about a dozen of the other troops. You couldn't put your hand on him. If you killed him, you would have to kill all of them. That's how rough it was. In other words, I decided, stay away! I mean, the uniform isn't worth it. The decorations aren't worth it. Things like that. And that was the end of it.

You were going to--

I couldn't shoot him.

No. But you were going to get his medals?

Yes. I wanted that hat. I wanted that hat, and I wanted the jacket. I wanted -- I'd like to just have him take his pants off and left him there naked.

Yes

Without anything on.

Yes

But you can't do that.

Yes.

Well, the main thing was, like I say, I was glad to get home. I got home on Thanksgiving Day of '45, and I'll tell you, the Army was so swift at Camp Grant; they didn't even want to give me my turkey dinner. But I insisted I get my turkey dinner, because I was hungry and I wanted to be fed!

Mr. Kolpas, the-- I think we mentioned this in our preliminary discussions during--you're in Normandy?

Yes.

You were wounded there?

Yes.

I don't know if we mentioned that on the tape. How did that happen?

Okay. If I forgot that, I forgot a big part of this. Okay, it was on the 27th of June, 1944, in the Barfleur, France area. We were just through clearing that ammunition dump, the German dump.

Oh, yes.

Where I got the rifle the day before, and all that, and as we were coming back towards our camp-site. There was like a construction hut, it appeared to me. Like, you see today, when you're putting up buildings, you have a trailer office.

Yes.

This one single story reminded me of a construction trailer. It had windows. It had a door. It had railings. It had several steps going on up to the door, but the thing that made me leery of it, because I had already passed it, was it had all clean, white gravel leading to the stairs. And then I heard this one man talk to Jim Foster, hollering at him, and he was saying, "Bosch! Bosch!" meaning German. And Jim was sort of hepped up on it, and he took a dash for that house which had the windows closed and everything, curtains down. And as he approached the gravel, he stepped on an S-mine. That S-mine just killed him instantly. Incidentally, I went back to his family in Appleton, Wisconsin. I told them that he was killed instantly and there was no suffering or anything as such

Because there was nothing that you could do. The priest was there at his side, the medics were there.

Incidentally, that priest was from the Humboldt Park area. That's really something. And he was wounded, also. Not in this incident, but he was wounded. He was in the evacuation center when I was in there. Father Al, I believe it was, from St. Fidelis Church on Hirsch Street in Chicago, around Hirsch and Washtenaw. And I spoke to him. He remembered me as one of the fellows in the neighborhood.

But that killed Jim and wounded five of us. And that's when I went back to Hospital.

And then they sent you back to England.

Yes, I went back to England. Incidentally, going back to England, there was a terrible thing that happened. A lot of U.S. troops were coming in to Normandy. And we were on a hospital ship. Now, a hospital ship is nothing to talk about, because it's terrible. They have you tagged. The doctor tags you by your condition. The ones that are gone, they stack up like firewood on the deck, five high, five stacks high. The ones that are about to, terrible, terrible shape, they are fed with morphine. The ones like myself that they can help, you're bandaged up and you're on your way to the hospital.

Just as we were leaving the Normandy area, a ship of troops came in. They had floating mines still out there in the water. And the mines are about two foot in diameter, round like balls, and they have these feelers on them, on the sides, the top. And when they hit something and they explode, that's it, baby. They hit one of those ships. We lowered mattresses down to pick up the dead and wounded, to bring them up to the ship, so we could take them back to England. And the medical corps was busier than hell picking up the dead and the wounded that hit the mine just as we were leaving. So, that was another terrible thing. And the sight when you come back to England of seeing all of those dead, olive green, I thought of that word, , ambulances waiting like an endless-- in a row, coming to pick you up, taking four at a time in, or more or less.

So you made-- you recovered then in England?

Yes, I recovered in England at the 28th General Hospital.

Did you have American nurses, or English nurses?

Oh, no. We had American. And we were in a big hospital, treated very, very, very well.

Where was that?

Hospital, wherever it was located.

Okay.

I don't have the name of the town. You asked me that question, actually, once before.

Oh, sorry.

No, that's all right, but I couldn't remember it then.

Yes.

And I can't remember it now where it was. It was, the 28th General Hospital.

And then—So, after a couple of three months, then they sent you back.

Yes, I came back to Europe.

And at that time, you again go by boat, but this time you landed--

Oh, yes. Did you ever hear this from anybody else?

No.

You must have, no, no, you must have-- coming back, what a difference, instead of being dropped off in the water from a Higgins boat.

Progress!

You, boy, I mean, you're put on, you pull up to a dock where you had to go through with your lifeboat above your head. You're on a landing. You walk on right on to the earth, right, at you, forget the beach, the beach is down below.

Amazing. And was that at Antwerp, you came in no--

No, no, -- I came back to the same basic area, Normandy.

Normandy again.

This time, yes.

Normandy again.

So, did you have to use your rifle again then, when you got back to Europe?

Yes, not the same M1.

You were still back in--

Incidentally, those rifles, see, what you do, I thought, being a real good marksman, quite steady-handed, one of the things you want to peer through is your sight. The sights are blackened. They are black. What would you say, flat black? Well, I thought I'd polish them up and then when I looked through the site, I could see where that thing was aiming at. They could see, too. It's like the tracers.

Yes.

Many a nights, hard to cover them.

Yes.

Because you want to make sure it's not seen.

So when they -- do you rejoin your unit then, when you came back to Europe?

Not exactly.

No.

I was discharged. I came in with the 298, and I was discharged with the 298. I did other tasks that I don't want to bring up at this session.

Sure.

like retraining personnel and things like that.

But you were in the drive to Germany then, were you--

Oh, yes. I participated in all of the campaigns. I missed none.

With your nine lives.

Over nine lives.

So when you came back then, you made use of the GI Bill?

Yes, when I returned home, I went back to school, first thing was to go back and complete Crane Tech, get the high school diploma, which was basic. Then I went to Wright Junior College, and then I went on to Chicago industrial engineering studies, and I got--my first job actually as an industrial engineer with the Euro Manufacturing Company. I ran a plant here in Chicago and in St. Louis, Missouri. Then when I was getting married, so I got a job with Reuben H. Donnelly, and I lasted there for about thirty years.

Was that the plant downtown or--

No. That was outside. Yellow Pages, "let your fingers do the walking."

Yes. Your wife, did you know her before you went in the Service?

No. I was married twice. This is my second marriage. I was married in 1953.

'50, okay, a little bit of time had passed.

Yes, because of schooling and everything else.

So, when you came back from the Service then, you were pretty serious about-- you didn't have a difficult time readjusting or making your way or--

No, no, I was pretty lucky.

There was room for you at home when you came home?

Oh, yes, because my older brother got married right away. In fact, he just passed on last May, 2007. He was eighty-five. I could share a bedroom with my other brother. My sister had her own room.

But, yes, I was serious about working. I know why I went into the engineers, because I was always handy, see. Even though I worked for Donnelly, I was very interested in construction all the time. In fact, I should have gone into construction and stayed in construction, because I was brought up liking working with tools. And that makes you relax if you get a lot of tension and things like that. You start using your own hands. You start doing something creative.

Yes. Did you --You stayed in touch with some of your wartime buddies, haven't you?

Oh, yes, we had reunions, and we kept in touch as much as you can. Some of them were almost impossible to contact because of their condition and things like that, but we had reunions every two years. Our reunions would be held in Michigan or in the Chicagoland area.

So, are you a member of the VFW then?

Oh, yes. I'm a lifetime member of the VFW.

A lifetime member.

Yes. I'm also a member, a thirty year plus. In fact, I have a thirty year pin coming from the Jewish War Veterans. I've been invited to join the American Legion, but how many organizations--

Yes.

I'll tell you what makes it tough as you get older and you've worked hard your whole life and you've saved and everything else. The way things are run today, you wonder how some people live. If nothing else will get you, the taxes will!

Really, because no matter how hard you work and all that, it's used up because of inflation, taxation, and things like--

Inflation, I think, is the--

Yes, I think about it. It doesn't worry me. My wife is very concerned about it. To give you an example, we brought a home eight years ago, and the taxes were 1700 dollars a year. The last tax bill was like 6600. And when you have two locations, because we both like to take it a little easier and get away from the cold winters. Now we are trying hard to sell our winter home in Florida and go on short vacations in the winter.

And you're entitled to it as well, yes.

We brought this place in Florida, and then I spoke before the legislature regarding taxes, and then they're going to do something about it. I understand they're going to reduce the taxes a little bit. But we've got the place up for sale. But the thing is, I really live day-to-day, one day at a time.

Yes.

I'm here today. And I had the pleasure of meeting yourself, Neil O'Shea.

Thank you.

Tomorrow, it will be someone else. Here, I can show you. When I first came into the place, I asked if you were there, and I wouldn't have known you from anyone else.

Mr. Kolpas, I have to ask you, how do you think your military service and experiences affected your life? That's a question we always ask, as we're winding up.

That's a good question. Let me think for a moment. I, myself, personally, have no regrets in having served proudly in the military, up to the recent wars that followed the Korean War, which I know nothing about really, the Vietnam War, during which I was working, and I know very little about the Gulf Wars. There are too many, too many, too many wars. People killing one another, for what. I mean, what's happened in the past administration with President George Bush, and I have really nothing against the parties, or anything, but he's gotten us into a terrible, terrible jam. And you can quote me on that. He's taken over three thousand lives away from families. I don't know how many are wounded, especially with these mines, the demolition devices that they are using. They have names for them. You can't see them, but if they don't get you today, they're going to get you tomorrow. That's the same with working with demolition in World War II.

Everything you want today, as you grow older, the inflation is really terrible. I'll give you an example. I consider myself lucky. Unfortunately, I've got heart problems, but I've never had heart surgery. There's a few other problems, but I'm here. A few aches and pains, but I'm still able to get up and get around. We went to a doctor. You live long enough, your doctors leave you. They leave you, because they retire or die.

Yes.

See, they serve you, and then they're gone. But, now, we're having another problem. I went to a doctor. He was a very fine young doctor just out of medical school. And I thought he was, and I think he is terrific even now. I have nothing against him. But, all of a sudden, he decides that he wants to make more money. He's going to still stay as a doctor. He's not going into carpentry or concrete work, but now the only difference is he's joined a group, a VIP group. "Max, if you want to come to me, I'm inviting you with open arms. Your wife is welcome as well. But, now, for the two of you to see me, approximately three thousand dollars up front at the Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital, or I can't operate. I can't see so many people. I have to limit my practice. I'm going to give you better service. I'll be on the phone to answer your calls whenever you call." I hope I live to see that from any doctor! You call them, they're on vacation.

Yes.

Or they're busy, or whatever it is, or this taxation factor, or helping people in need. I'm fortunate. I'm insured. My medication is insured, and, therefore, my wife's medication. Many people can't afford medical, dental, medication, etc today.

Yes.

these necessities. There has to be change.

Yes, especially for--.

And it's putting at risk--

Especially for our vets that are injured.

Yes, it's just awful.

Yes.

And, you know, for our future generation to take on the debt that's being created, if it was used for more useful purposes, we'd all be way ahead.

Yes.

Who the hell had to go in and get ourselves involved in Iraq! Weapons of mass destruction, when they haven't proved any, they could bury them, and they'll find them. You can do anything, if you work hard enough at it.

Yes.

Prices of fuel, I never cared when I had to go somewhere with my car. Hell, get in the car. So what if I get twelve miles a gallon, fifteen miles a gallon.

But now it becomes an issue.

But now it's an issue.

Yes.

Now, when you're at the pump, it's over three dollars a gallon.

Three dollars a gallon, yes.

You know, somebody's making money out of this.

Yes.

You know, when I got out of the Service, as I mentioned to you, my parents needed a place to live. I never drank. I never smoke. We have other vices. But I saved as much as I could. And I was able to help them buy their home, when I got out of the Service, which was a three flat in Humboldt Park for 7000 dollars. A couple months ago, I'm photographing the area. I go by the house, 1314 Rockwell. I see they're rehabbing the house. I walk in. I introduce myself to the guys. I lived here 70 years ago. Well, we're talking about 63 years ago, what we just discussed, on record.

Yes.

I says, "Can I go through that house?" He said, "Sure," takes me through, shows me where I used to sleep in the kitchen. And I asked him, before leaving, I said, "I'm always interested in construction," and all this and that. "What did you have to pay for this house?" He says, "I paid a half a million dollars." He said, "I dug the basement out, two feet, and we put I beams through there to support it, so we can make a duplex out of this. I'll charge five hundred and some thousand for that duplex. The other two apartments, I'm going to get 300,000 apiece." I think he's in dreamland. But, anyway, people can't afford all this!

Yes. It's going--

It's crazy.

Even now, it seems

It's got to come down to reality.

It seems like the bubble is sort of leaking a little bit right now, economically.

No. It's been real tough. And I don't worry about it. But, like I say, others do.

Yes. Mr. Kolpas, there's one treasured memory that you were kind enough to share with me. And I think it was before we actually began the interview, but as we move toward the end, you showed me your dog tags here.

Yes.

And then attached to the dog tags is this--

Yes, that is a mezuzah.

A religious artifact.

A mezuzah.

A mezuzah.

Yes. I want to tell you, that's when you enter into a Jewish home, on the door, usually to the left, and that would be part of the frame, you'll find an article of a larger type fastened to the door. It's to protect you from danger. It's a blessing for the family within. When I went into the Service, the synagogue that my parents belonged to sent this to me as a safety keepsake. And I attached it to my dog tags, figuring anything that helps is welcome. And as I said to you, I noticed during the Normandy Invasion when I got out of the water, I got up on to the shore, that that little oval capsule was missing. Well, the parchment that was in there, I just didn't want it to leave it open, so I crimped it with my teeth, and I've had it ever since. Now, I haven't used this for many, many years, but I said, "If I'm coming here to meet with you today, I think that would be something interesting to bring along with me."

Yes, it surely is, and I'm very appreciative that you've shared so much with us this afternoon.

Well, it's my pleasure.

Your outline and related documents.

Yes.

And pictures. It's going to be a wonderful transcript when we get this all finished.

Well, I appreciate your help and all that. I should try and offer more help. I know that tomorrow there's a meeting in Niles on Thursday for the veterans group.

Mr. Freidman.

I go there. I've been coming to these -- exchanging thoughts and things of that nature. And everyone has their differences of opinion.

I'm not going to be here forever. I feel that the future generations should know what their forefathers went through, and I feel that this is a good thing to have for reference sake and for them to-- look at a lot of these people today, and I've spoken to them, they don't believe what has happened. I could sit here and tell you stories that are, so help me, true, that you wouldn't believe. And it's all close to home, and they're true. But I just don't want to talk about them, you know.

Well, you shared a lot.

I shared a lot with you.

And it's a beautiful closing statement about the value of the project. Thank you.

No. I tell you, maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm right. Maybe I'm wrong, but all is not known because of reason. But even being of the Jewish faith, and through circles, I can just mention to you that I have met people I've known that have served not only under Hitler, but for Hitler, in his headquarters. And you know this is almost unbelievable, and when it comes to certain details

no one wants to talk about it. But this is exactly how I found out what happened to my uncle and their kids that lived in the same unit of housing by the flax factory near Rakashok, Lithuania. Because one of the soldiers that was involved in this thing in the German Army back in the early forties, I actually traced him to where he lived in the Chicago area, and when I reported him to our federal department, he had already left the States. He retired working for the railroad, and he took off for Europe with his wife. I just missed him by a hair. I followed him until he got to where he was, and when I asked him what his function was in the German Army, he answered me that he knew my uncle and aunt and the kids. He said he was a mailman for the German forces, and he delivered mail to them. Now could you believe talking to someone like that – unbelievable, unbelievable! My uncle and his family lived next door to us in Lithuania.

What could I do to him? You do something wrong, and you're in trouble.

Was he a German or a Lithuanian?

This man was a German soldier.

Like I said, I have a lot of friends of the German ancestry. "One could be born of any faith" and raised and become a person of another faith when an infant..

That's amazing. I'm glad you called, and I am very grateful that you came in.

I think that what you were doing is important. Hopefully we'll wind this up right now and any other help that I could provide, or be of any service to you, let me know.

It's no fun; when you are called to serve, you serve. I was glad to have served my country and to help future generations to believe that what has happened actually existed during World War II under Adolph Hitler's leadership.

Thank you. Mr. Kolpas.

And you'll get a kick out of that picture (referring to photo of General's Eisenhower's car which appears in the appendix), for yourself, or whatever, because that one there, I gave that copy of this to some car buffs. That's a very expensive car. I think it's a '41 Cadillac, and it's a convertible 4 door. It's a-- I have been attending auto shows, because I also have a classic car.

What kind do you have?

I have an Olds convertible. There were only seven hundred of them custom-made. Now there are less than a hundred around--it's an '84. It's kept in Florida now.

What kind of an Olds do you have, a Cutlass?

A Cutlass Ciera Brougham. It should be worth some money in years to come.

Yes. Good engines in those.

Well, it was, until the Florida mechanics got a hold of it. Well, they ruined the engine, and I had to have it completely rebuilt.

And, by the way, in closing Mr. O'Shea, I'd like to bring up June the 12th of 1944. The 298 combat engineers were finally intact. Our esteemed Lieutenant Colonel appeared with the kitchen party from England. They were the last echelon to get to Normandy. I was in a foxhole near Saint Marie Dumont close to Hubert, France. And there was a German aircraft overhead way up in the sky. It was a recon airplane. You could tell by the engine, again the engine sound, uh, uh, uh, uh. And then the colonel ordered us out of the foxholes to remove some of the glider planes that came in on D-Day that were cluttering the field. Who the hell knows why! We don't stay in one place anyway. We just go from one spot to the next; we move on. And then they told us to stay where we were in formation for a head count or a roll call. Approximately at 11 o'clock in the evening, a German fighter plane attacked us. He dropped antipersonnel bombs on us, cut his engine, made a turnaround, and returned firing his 50 caliber machine gun on us. Five men were killed. Twenty-five were wounded. I got a clear view of him in the cockpit against the skyline. No return fire from us at all. In fact, I, myself, was surprised. I didn't take a shot at him. Because he was so low and so close, but that's the way it goes.

Wow.

No, that's really something. This German pilot had a lot of guts, knew exactly what he was doing. And after he left all the devastation behind, I could just think in my mind of the return that he received after he had all this on tape, on film to show the Reich.

Would they--

They were taking pictures. And I'm sure this was all filmed. I could see him wearing that German iron cross right now. But I had a very, very clear view at him. And that plane was flying at about roughly 300 miles an hour and could have been shot down, but not one shot was fired from any of us, because of all the chaos.

Shock.

At what was happening in the area. And why the heck we had to fool around with those gliders is beyond me, they were all tail up, every one of them. And we'd just move out of the area within hours, so let whatever lies, be there. It really makes no sense to me, but that's our Lieutenant Colonel for you.

Is that the esteemed lieutenant colonel?

Yes, the esteemed Lieutenant Colonel.

Thank you, Mr. Kolpas.

Reader's Note:

Please find appended

- Copy of General Eisenhower's statement to the troops on D-Day
- Scanned copy of a Higgins Boat, similar to one that brought Mr.Kolpas to the Omaha Beach landing
- Scan of photo of Mr. Kolpas's dog tags and mezuzah with map of France
- Scan of Normandy map annotated and highlighted by Mr. Kolpas. His unit was involved in clearing road "N 13."
- Scanned copy of photo of Mr.Kolpas pointing to the 5-star plate of General Eisenhower's Cadillac staff car in Berlin
- Scanned copy of Mr. Kolpas's Enlisted Record and Report of Separation/Honorable Discharge, listing medals received
- *Omaha Beach To Saint Marie Du Mont, with the 298th Engineer (C) Battalion in France June 8 – 14, 1944*

The detailed 15-page tribute was written by Lieutenant Colonel Francis B. Robinson, USA (ret.) © 2002. It is dedicated to his father, Bruce Montgomery Robertson, who served alongside Mr. Kolpas and was wounded by the German plane in the incident described on page 31. Colonel Robinson gave permission for the inclusion of this tribute. Colonel Robinson's son is currently serving in the armed forces overseas.

IKE'S D-Day Message to the troops

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

~~You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward~~
which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

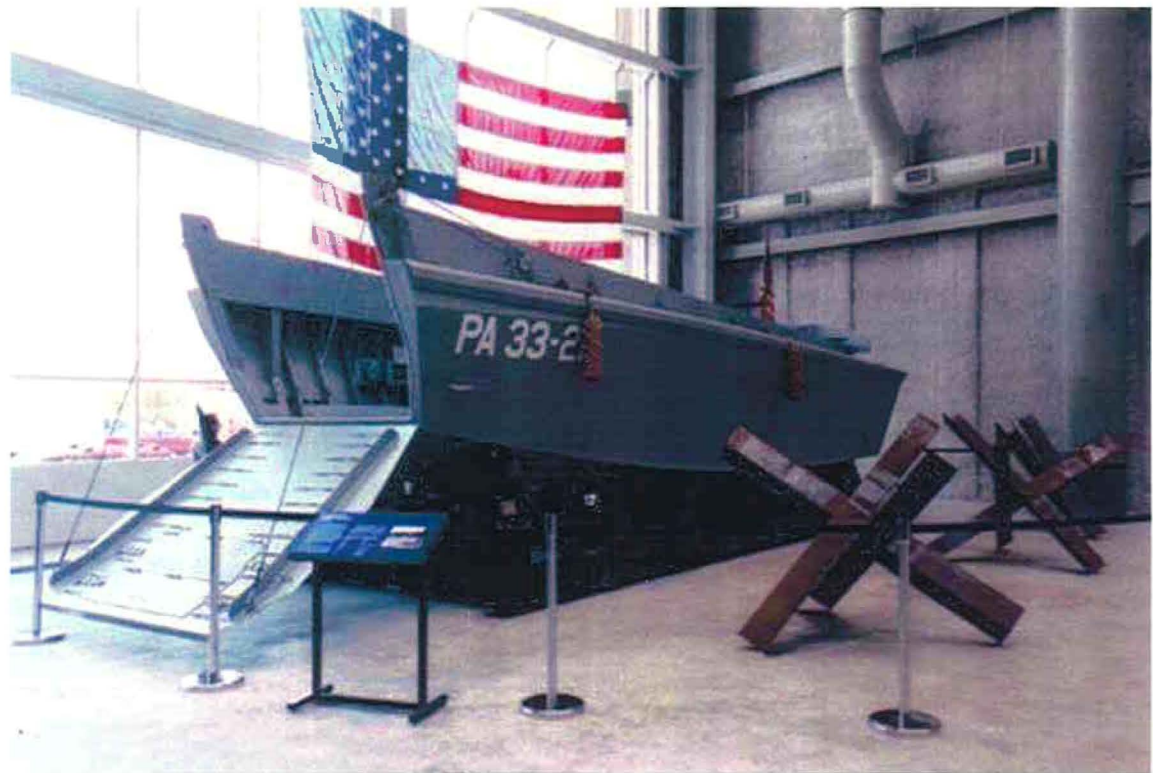
But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

- Displacement: 18,000 lb (8,000 kg) light
- Length: 36 ft 3 in (11.0 m)
- Beam: 10 ft 10 in (3.3 m)
- Draft: 3 ft aft, 2 ft 2 in forward (0.9, 0.7 m)
- Speed: 9 knots (17 km/h)
- Armament: 2 × .30 cal (7.62 mm) machine guns
- Crew complement: 3
- Capacity: 36 troops or 6,000 lb (2,700 kg) vehicle or 8,100 lb (3,700 kg) general cargo
225 hp (168 kW) Diesel (gray) or 250 hp (186 kW) gasoline (Hall-Scott) engines



Higgins boat of type which carried Mr. Kolpas to Normandy's Omaha Beach.

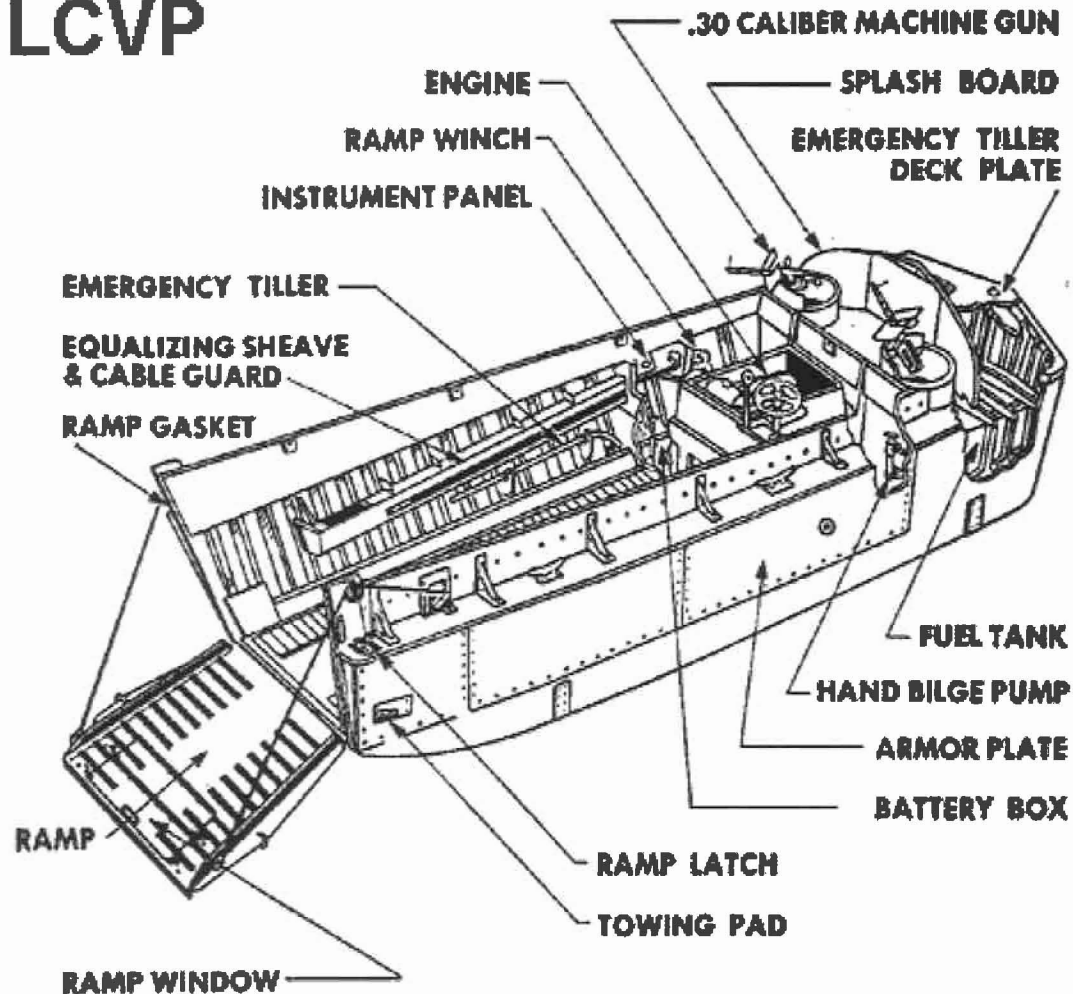
Photo courtesy of <http://www.rogerbell.org/images/Yellowstone/Rushmore/higgins.jpg>

Higgins display in National D-Day Museum-New Orleans, LA

“The Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) or Higgins boat was a landing craft used extensively in World War II. The craft was designed by Andrew Higgins of Louisiana, based on boats made for operating in swamps and marshes. More than 20,000 were built, by Higgins Industries and licensees.”

LCVP

Getting
Ashore



“Constructed from plywood, this shallow-draft barge-like boat could ferry a platoon-sized complement of 36 men to shore at 9 knots (17 km/h). Men generally entered the boat by climbing down a cargo net hung from the side of their troop transport; they exited by charging down the boat’s bow ramp.”



Sgt. Kolpas's dog tags and mezuzah which he wore going ashore at Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944, are displayed across the English Channel.

Sgt. Kolpas was later wounded on June 12th near Barfleur.



Sgt. Kolpas points to 5 Star license plate of General Dwight David Eisenhower's personal car at Tempelhoff Airport in Berlin, Germany, in 1945.

The purpose of Ike's visit was to watch a low parachute jump by the 82nd and 101st Airborne. Some chutes failed to open, and troops lost their lives unnecessarily.

**ENLISTED RECORD AND REPORT OF SEPARATION
HONORABLE DISCHARGE**

BOOK 71 PAGE 362

1. LAST NAME - FIRST NAME - MIDDLE INITIAL KOLPAS MAX		2. ARMY SERIAL NO. 36 653 741	3. GRADE SGT	4. ARM OR SERVICE CE	5. COMPONENT AUS
6. ORGANIZATION CO B 298TH ENGR (C) BN		7. DATE OF SEPARATION 21 NOV 1945	8. PLACE OF SEPARATION SEPARATION CENTER CAMP GRANT ILLINOIS		
9. PERMANENT ADDRESS FOR MAILING PURPOSES 1314 N ROCKWELL ST CHICAGO ILL		10. DATE OF BIRTH 28 JUL 1924	11. PLACE OF BIRTH LITHUANIA		
12. ADDRESS FROM WHICH EMPLOYMENT WILL BE RESUMED SEE 9		13. COLOR EYES BROWN	14. COLOR HAIR BROWN	15. HEIGHT 5-8 1/2	16. WEIGHT 160 lbs
17. NO. DEPENDENTS 0	18. CIVILIAN OCCUPATION AND NO. ENGINE LATHE OPERATOR 4-78.011				

MILITARY HISTORY

19. DATE OF INDUCTION 24 MAR 43	20. DATE OF ENLISTMENT 31 MAR 43	21. DATE OF REENTRY INTO SERVICE FT SHERIDAN ILL
22. SERVICE NUMBER 127	23. LOCATION AND STATE COOK CO, ILLINOIS	24. DUTY ASSIGNMENT SEE 9
25. QUALIFICATION SPECIALTY AND NO. FOREMAN CONSTRUCTION 059		26. SPECIALTY SHARPSHOOTER W/ M.30 CAL
27. BATTLES AND CAMPAIGNS NORMANDY NORTHERN FRANCE ARDENNES RHINELAND CENTRAL EUROPE		
28. DECORATIONS AND CITATIONS 3 OVERSEAS SERVICE BARS EUROPEAN-AFRICAN-MIDDLE EASTERN THEATER RIBBON W/1 SILVER BATTLE STAR GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL PURPLE HEART MEDAL GO 4 HQ 28TH GENERAL HOSPITAL 1944 WORLD WAR II VICTORY MEDAL		
29. WOUNDS RECEIVED IN ACTION WOUNDED IN ACTION IN FRANCE ON 27 JUNE 1944. WOUNDED IN LEFT ARM		
30. LATEST INDUCTION DATA IMM STIM STIM MAR 44 DEC 44 MAR 44		31. SERVICE NUMBER 127
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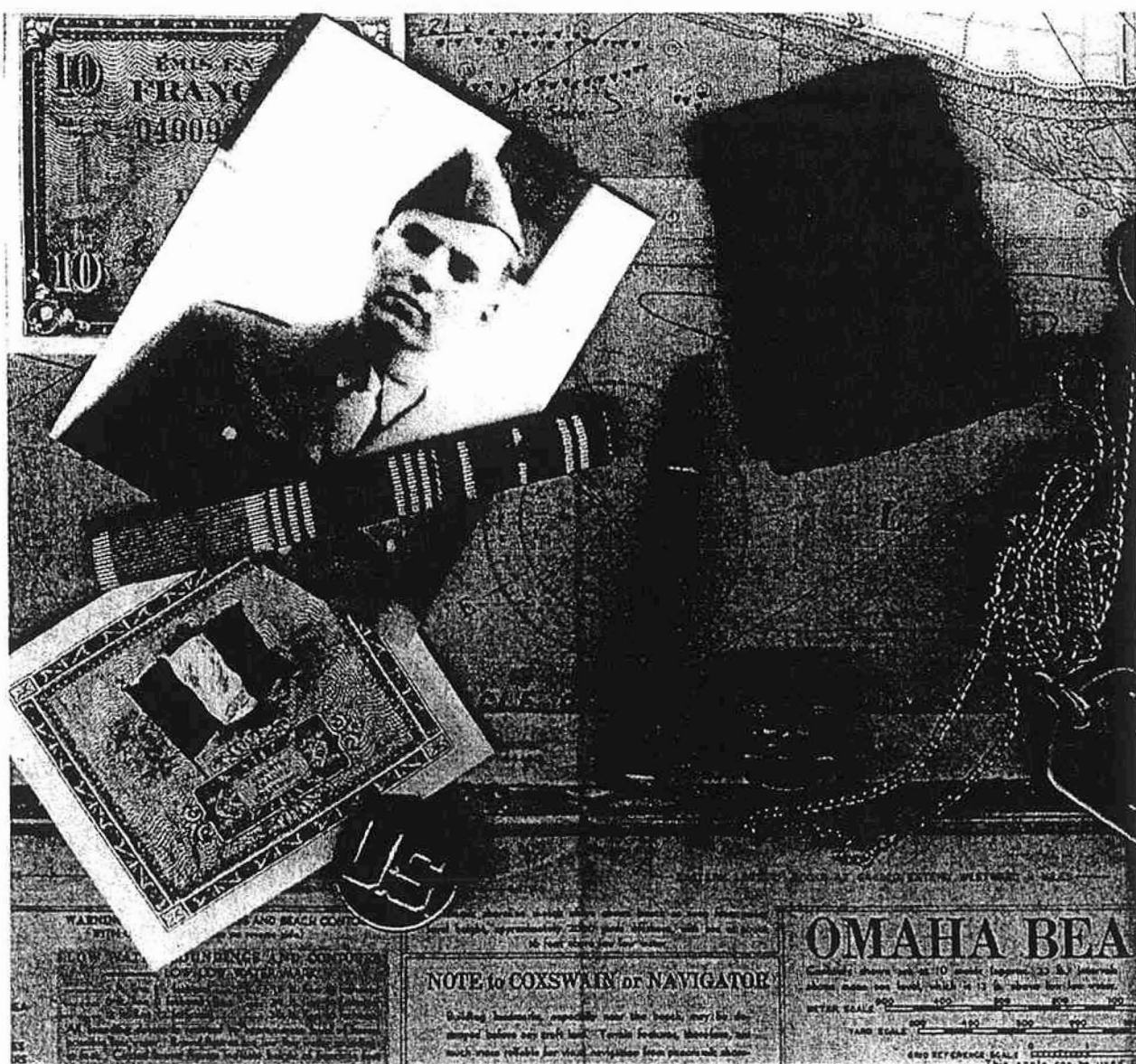
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Mr. Kolpas's enlisted record and honorable discharge record.
Please note medals received.
Above image is a scanned copy.



OMAHA BEACH

TO SAINT MARIE DU MONT

With the 298th Engineer (C) Battalion in France
June 8 – 14, 1944

Omaha Beach to Saint Marie du Mont

With the 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion in France
June 8 – 14, 1944

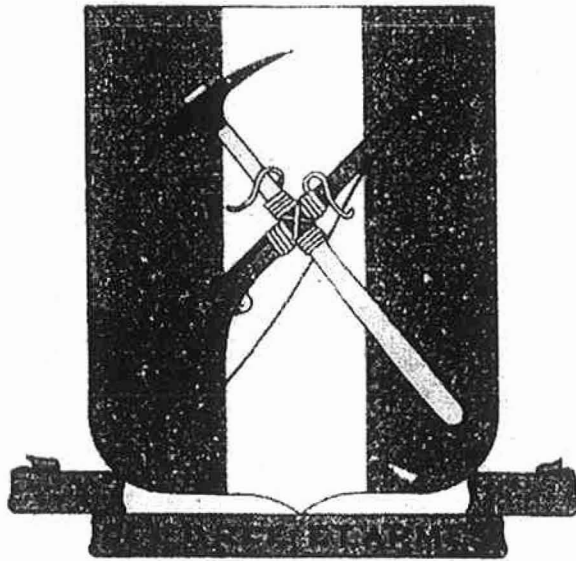
By
Lieutenant Colonel Francis B. Robertson, USA (Ret.) © 2002



Dedicated to my father, Bruce Montgomery Robertson
United States Army 1943-1944

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of my father's World War II experiences as a participant in the 1944 Allied invasion of Europe. It covers the period from the day he landed in France to the day he was returned to England following wounds received in action. It is not meant to be a complete history of his military service, a history of the 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion, or a history of the Normandy Invasion. It is intended rather to be a simple tribute to the service and sacrifice of one soldier of America's "Greatest Generation." The hope is that it will serve as a permanent record for posterity, for his family and his descendants, "*lest we forget.*"



Insignia of the 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following veterans, and family members of veterans, of the 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion who contributed to the research for this history. By sharing their recollections and stories, they helped to fill in many gaps, reinforce certain facts, and create a clearer picture of the events of June 8-14, 1944. As is to be expected, memories have faded after nearly 60 years, and the confusing events of the largest military operation in history left varying impressions on the young men who participated in this great undertaking. In cases

where information was conflicting, I have attempted to use my best judgment in documenting dates, locations and events. Any errors that are noted are my responsibility alone. The author would appreciate hearing from those who wish to make additions or corrections to this document. My deepest appreciation goes to the following individuals whose contributions made this story possible: Wilfred Beaudry, Margaret Bellinger (widow of Dwayne Bellinger), Albert A. DiGiovanni, Al Brogna, Jim Crotty, Edward W. Franckowiak, Ralph Ginger, Don Hill, Frank Hollis, Arthur Hrabec, Max Kolpas, Burton LaBoe, Kenneth A. Lang, Creighton Lawson, Drexell E. Meyer, Tom Moscovic, Arnold Payne, Bob Rauch (son of Herb Rauch), Paul Schneiderhan, Milton Stover, Jessie Toepfer (widow of Charles J. Toepfer), Leo B. Wortman, Lucille Whiteturkey (widow of Ray Whiteturkey), Janet Wright (daughter of Robert Francis), and Bruce M. Robertson. It is equally a tribute to them, and to their comrades-in-arms, many of whom now rest in peace.

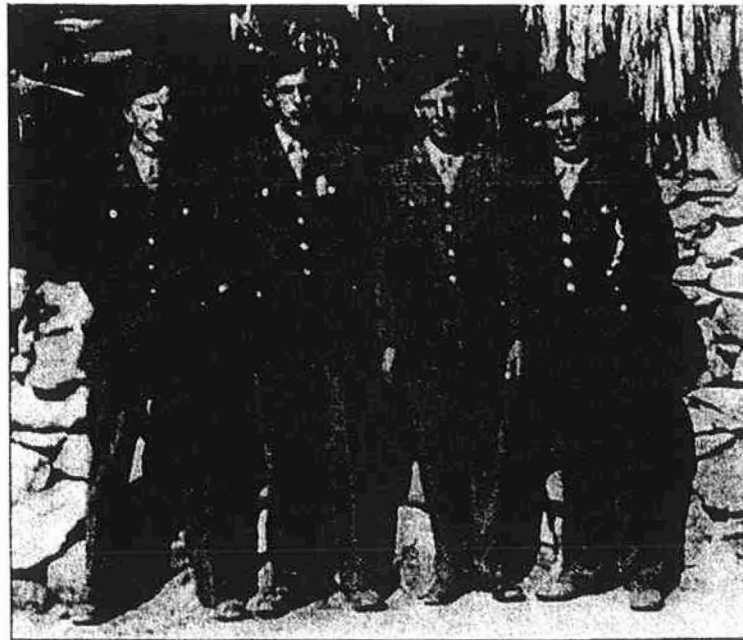
THE STORY



Private Bruce M. Robertson, 1943.

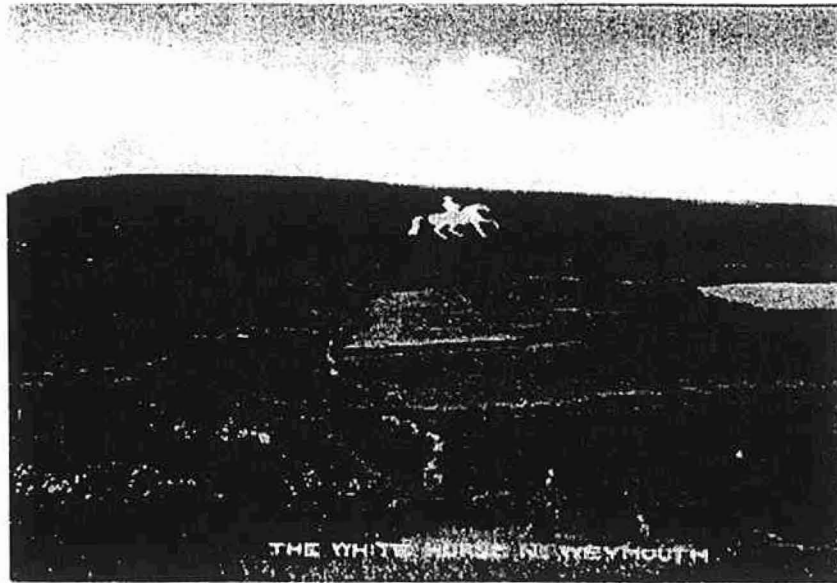
This is the story of one soldier's experiences during the Normandy Invasion. Bruce Montgomery Robertson of Oregon, Illinois, was a member of Third Platoon,

Company B, 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion. He volunteered for induction on March 2, 1943 at age 19 years and four months. Bruce entered service at Camp Grant, Illinois, and then joined the 298th at Camp Rucker, Alabama as it was being formed as a separate engineer combat battalion. Following basic training and a brief stint with the Army Specialized Training Program in New Jersey, Bruce rejoined the battalion at the Desert Training Center, Camp Iron Mountain, California. After completion of its training, the Battalion moved by rail to Boston to prepare for overseas shipment. The 298th departed the United States on board the troop ship, USS Explorer, on January 19, 1944.



**Members of Company B on pass from Camp Iron Mountain, California in late 1943
(l to r: Drexel Meyer, Harlan Myers, Bruce Robertson, Bob Frederico).**

After a 9-day voyage, the USS Explorer docked at Grennoch (near Glasgow), Scotland on January 28, 1944. Although trained in desert warfare, the men of the 298th now knew that they would soon begin training for the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe. The Battalion traveled by train to the South of England, where it encamped at Preston, Dorset not far from the port city of Weymouth on the English Channel. The battalion was located next to the camp of their sister unit, the 297th Engineers, and down the road from an Army Air Corps unit. On the hill overlooking the camp was a chalk-carved figure of King George III on horseback dating from the early 19th Century. It would become a familiar sight to the 298th.



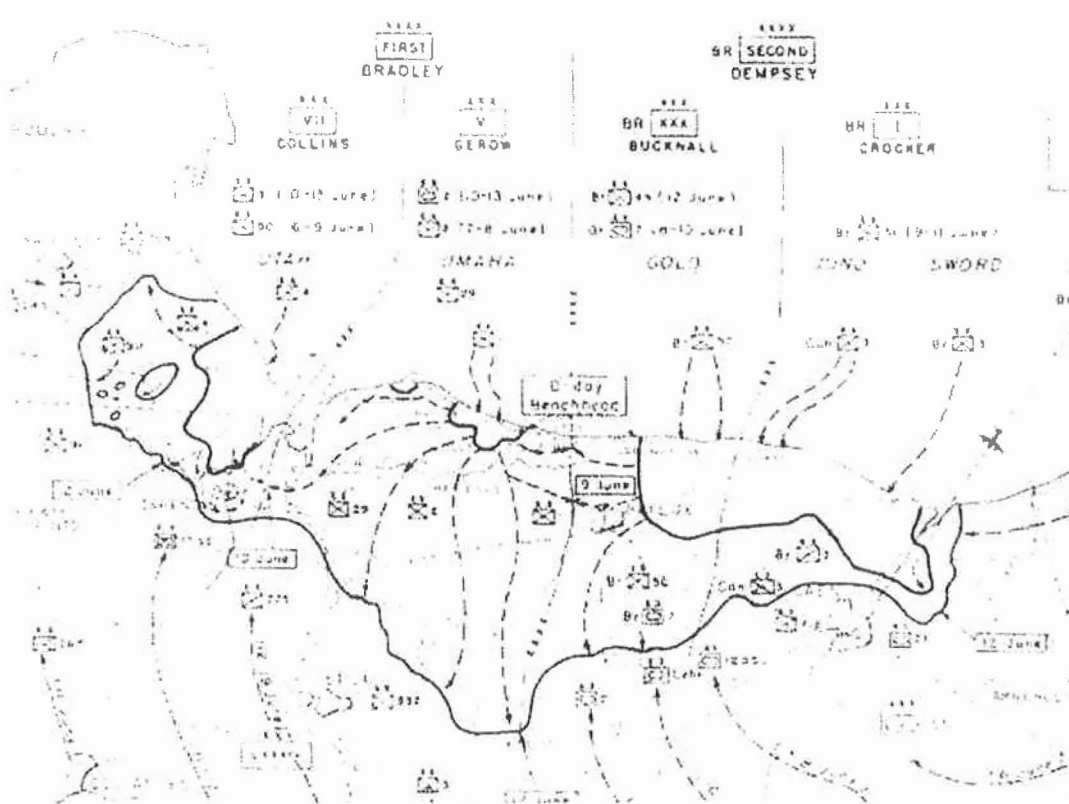
The chalk-carved figure of King George III near Weymouth

The men were billeted in tents and Quonset huts, with straw mattresses for bedding, making for hard sleeping. Many of the soldiers got to know the local civilians in the area. Bruce and Bob Frederico, of Aurora, Illinois, made friends with the Piercy family who owned a grocery store on the outskirts of Weymouth. They visited them frequently while on pass, often joining them for meals. The 298th's soldiers also visited the prehistoric ruin of Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain.

The late winter and spring of 1944 were spent in training in bridge construction and demolition (build it and then blow it up!) and, of course, small unit tactics and weapons familiarization and qualification. Combat engineers had the secondary mission of fighting as infantry. Bruce, though trained on the M1 rifle as his basic weapon, was also trained on the use of the flame-thrower and learned of the inherent danger of this weapon should a bullet strike one of the fuel tanks, which were carried on the operator's back. In April 1944 the 298th and other U.S. Army units participated in the massive pre-invasion training exercise at Slapton Sands on the southern coast of England, code-named Operation TIGER. The battalion helped construct beach obstacles and lay land mines to simulate what would be encountered by the forces in the initial assault on the German-held coast of France. It was here that an accident occurred when several men of the 297th Engineers were killed while unloading live land mines. Company B of the 298th was assigned to take over their mission and the unpleasant task of cleaning up the area. During the mock invasion, the men were allowed to observe the exercise from a vantage point on the hillside overlooking the beach. Company B saw the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lieutenant General Omar N.

Bradley, the commander of the U.S. 1st Army, as well as British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and other VIPs also observing the exercise.

As the weather grew warmer the imminent invasion date, "D-Day," drew closer. The plans for the Allied invasion of France, code-named Operation OVERLORD, called for an airborne assault during the night to secure the flanks of the beachhead followed by a sea-borne assault at dawn by American, British and Canadian forces. Though not known to the men at the time, the assault would take place on five beaches on the coast of Normandy just East of the Cherbourg Peninsula. The British and Canadians were to land on three beaches in the east, code-named GOLD, JUNO and SWORD, while the Americans were assigned the two most westerly beaches, known as UTAH and OMAHA. Like many combat engineer battalions, the 298th was a "bastard outfit" not assigned to a particular division, but rather directly under 1st Army command to be employed wherever needed. The 298th was scheduled to land on UTAH beach after the initial D-Day assault to provide general support to the U.S. VII Corps. The men knew that the date for the invasion was approaching, but had no idea when D-Day would come.



Plan for Operation OVERLORD showing the five invasion beaches and the extent of the beachhead (red line) when linkup between UTAH and OMAHA beachheads finally occurred on June 12th.

The 298th began preparations for movement to their marshalling area at the end of May. As the weather began to worsen, Company B was issued live ammunition and boarded trucks in the marshalling area on June 5th for transport to the docks at Weymouth. While passing through Weymouth, the GI's saw members of a USO circus troupe that had recently performed for them at camp. Bruce was issued the flame-thrower that he was to carry into combat, along with an M-1 carbine and a gas mask. On June 6th, the morning that the invasion was launched, the men were aboard a troop ship waiting to cross the English Channel to France. While watching the sky filled with aircraft of all varieties heading for the battle, the individual soldiers had very little information on where they were going, or what their mission would be. They only knew that their battalion was not among those landing in the first waves of the invasion. However, a small beach demolition party of 13 men under the Company B Third Platoon leader, Lt. Bernard L. Stafford, was assigned to land on UTAH Beach before H-Hour to assist in clearing lanes through the beach obstacles for the assault troops of the 4th Infantry Division.



A unit marches through Weymouth on the way to board a ship for the Channel crossing.

The battalion was divided between at least two different transport ships for the Channel crossing, with the battalion headquarters and heavy equipment on one, and the line companies (A, B and C) on at least one, and possibly two or more

other ships. Company B spent two days aboard ship, June 6th in the port at Weymouth, and June 7th crossing the Channel. During the crossing, the men were given self-heating British canned rations. As they waited to go ashore, they saw ships returning to England with the wounded on deck from the initial assault waves of the previous day. They also witnessed the 15-inch guns of the battleship USS Texas constantly shelling the coast. In hindsight, this would have been the first clue that they were about to go ashore on OMAHA Beach – not UTAH Beach as planned, as the Texas was anchored off OMAHA providing naval gunfire support to the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd and 5th Ranger battalions.

The battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company, along with much of the unit's heavy equipment and weapons, landed according to plan on UTAH Beach on June 9th. However, the three line companies A, B, and C somehow were put ashore several miles to the east, on OMAHA Beach, not on UTAH as called for in the plan – and a day earlier, on June 8th! It is not clear why this occurred. It is possible that this was simply an error on the part of the Navy. It is equally possible that, due to the graver situation on OMAHA Beach, some units designated to land at UTAH where the attack was progressing ahead of schedule, were diverted to OMAHA to bolster the endangered beachhead.

It appears from the accounts of 298th veterans that the three line companies did not land all at the same time and possibly not even on the same day. Some of the men interviewed reported landing on June 7th, while others reported landing on June 9th. Bruce's Army discharge document states that he left England on June 7th and arrived in France on June 8th, but this may not have been the experience of men in the other companies, depending on the number of ships and the time of debarkation. Suffice it to say that there was much confusion during the initial 72 hours of the invasion.

Company B of the 298th appears to have come ashore on the morning of June 8, about 48 hours after the initial assault waves landed on D-Day. They climbed down rope ladders to reach the LCVP's (landing craft vehicle personnel), also known as "Higgins boats," that would transport them to the beach. Some fell into the water due to the choppy sea and had to be rescued. Most of Third Platoon were together in one boat, with the platoon sergeant, SSgt. Wiener, in command, the platoon leader, Lt. Stafford, being detached for the demolition mission. The sea was rough causing the boat to bounce severely, and there was a mist or fog with a light rain falling. The men could hear gunfire in the distance but could not see much ahead of them. The landing craft dropped the platoon in shallow water and

they waded ashore on OMAHA. Other platoons were dropped off in up to five or more feet of water, where the men had to struggle hard to get to the beach.



Soldiers wading ashore from an LCV after the initial assault wave, as did Company B on June 8th.

The beach was by then filling up with tanks and trucks. Many recalled the grim sight of the bodies of scores of American soldiers from the first waves who landed on June 6th, lined up on the beach "like cordwood." Several of the 298th veterans reported that most of the dead wore the blue and gray patch of the 29th Infantry Division, which indicates that Company B landed at the western end of OMAHA Beach, probably near the village of Vierville-sur-Mere. Some veterans also reported seeing dead of the 1st Infantry Division and the Ranger battalions.

The company formed up and marched up a steep cliff past some knocked out German guns and pillboxes, as well as enemy dead. The stench was terrible. From the descriptions of the terrain given, it would appear that the Company moved inland through Exit D-1 at the western end of OMAHA Beach. When the men reached the top of the cliffs they were able to see the enormous panorama of the beach, with vehicles being disgorged from larger ships and the first details of men beginning to gather the bodies of the dead for burial. They marched by a German prisoner of war pen on the way off the beach. The fighting was by now beyond the immediate area of the beach, but the sound of the guns was ever present. They made their way inland, heading west behind the coastline through the hedgerows of the Norman countryside.

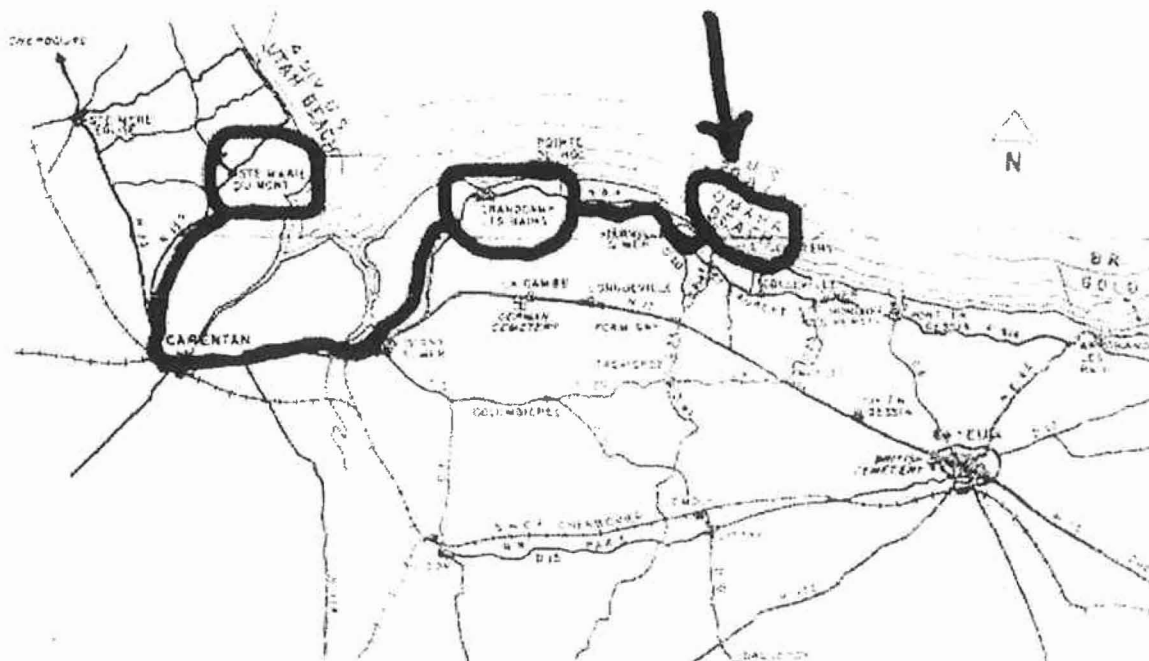


Men of the 2nd Infantry Division move inland from OMAHA Beach on June 7th. Company B of the 298th marched up these cliffs, and possibly past this same pillbox, the next day.

Company B moved to an assembly area in the 29th Infantry Division rear, near the village of Grandcamp-les-Bains. This was not far from the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc, which had been the assault objective of the Rangers on D-Day. They found themselves in the hedgerows near an apple orchard, where they dug in and waited for other members of the battalion to arrive, and for their orders. The men were told to dig foxholes and to stay down. One man was shot the first night when he stood up to relieve himself. During that night, while on perimeter guard duty, Bruce heard movement to his front, issued the challenge HALT! three times, and when there was no response, he fired his weapon. He then heard a loud "moooooo," and realized that he had shot a French cow! It rained that night, and the troops slept in their raincoats. The sky was bright with flares and anti-aircraft tracers and some men slept under vehicles for more concealment.

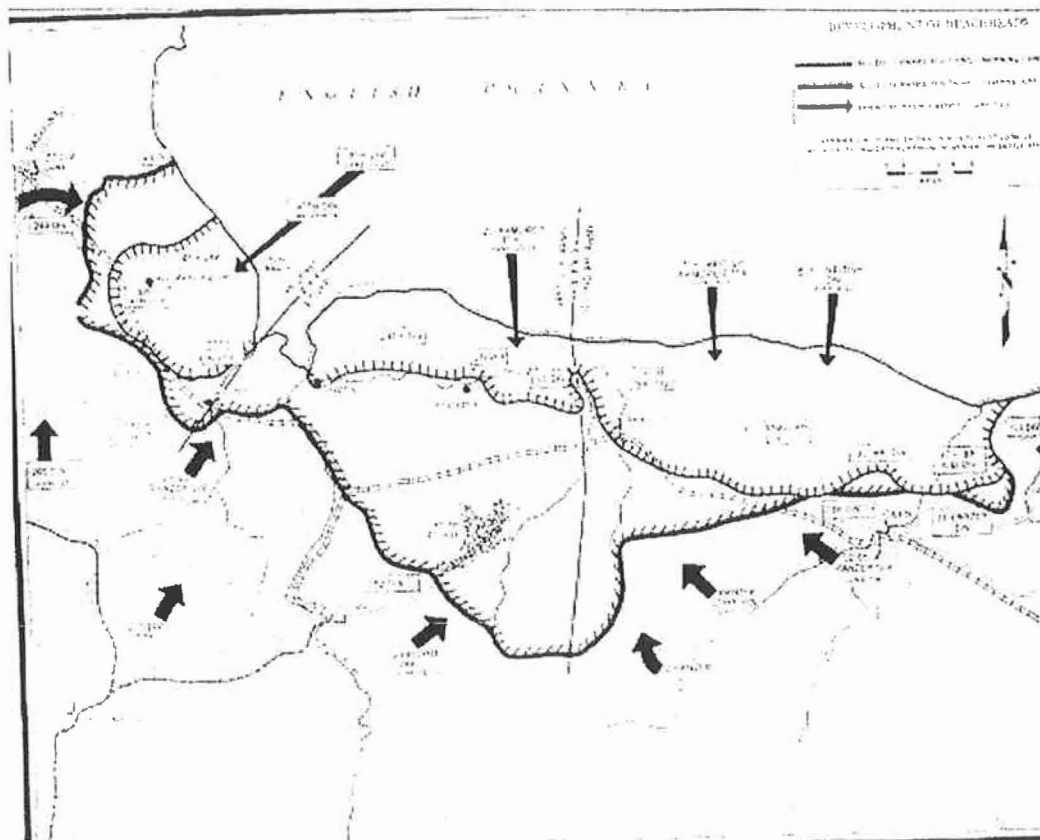
More troops from the other companies of the 298th began arriving in the assembly area. Some of the men scavenged for calvados (Norman apple brandy) from the local farms. On the third day, Bruce walked up a long country lane and used his limited high school French to obtain some fresh milk and eggs from a local farmer. This supplemented the K-rations and Army coffee the men carried with them. The troops remained in the hedgerows for four nights. Unbeknownst to them, they

were actually awaiting the linkup of the two American beachheads so that they could rejoin their battalion headquarters behind UTAH Beach to the west, and begin their mission in support of the VII Corps. The area between the beaches had not yet been cleared and was still in enemy hands. The artillery and anti-aircraft fire was constant, as was the threat of air attack. Flares and tracers continued to illuminate the night sky.



Map of the area traversed by A, B, and C Companies of the 298th from the landing at OMAHA Beach on June 8th, to the movement on June 12th between Grandcamp-les-Bains (upper right), through Isigny and Carentan, to the battalion bivouac area behind UTAH Beach near Saint Marie du Mont (left).

Finally, on the afternoon of June 12th, the company was formed for movement westward, although the men did not know their final destination. On that day, soldiers of the 29th Infantry and 2nd Armored Divisions from OMAHA Beach met the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne and GI's of the 4th Infantry Division near the city of Carentan, thereby linking the two beachheads. Trucks arrived in the early evening to transport the men of A, B and C companies to the UTAH Beachhead to rejoin the rest of the 298th. The trucks had no covers and the troops were warned not to stand up, as it was reported that the Germans had stretched wires across the roads. There were not enough trucks for the numbers of troops, and they were overloaded and uncomfortable. The convoy moved out past more roped off German POW pens, and headed West toward the cities of Isigny and Carentan.



German counterattacks against the linked American beaches on June 13th. Note the VII Corps/V Corps boundary through Carentan, where the beachheads were linked on June 12th, enabling the three companies of the 298th to move from OMAHA to UTAH beachheads.

By the time they reached their destination at 2300 hours (11 p.m.) it was nearly dusk. During the movement, some of the men had noticed a single-engine German reconnaissance plane appearing to follow the convoy at a distance. The 298th battalion headquarters was located in a field near the town of Saint Marie du Mont. The field had been the landing zone for the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division on D-Day and was cluttered with wrecked and damaged gliders. Company B was ordered off the trucks and into a company formation for roll call by their commanding officer, Lt. Cohen. After this was done, they were ordered to remain in formation but allowed to sit on the ground while awaiting further instructions. The battalion S-2 (intelligence) officer, Lt. Lawson, passed by and advised the sergeant in charge of the formation that the men should disperse and dig in for safety because of the enemy aircraft that had been seen in the area. The lieutenant was informed that they were under orders to remain in the formation until their commanding officer returned from battalion headquarters.

Suddenly and without warning, the German plane that had been spotted earlier reappeared, cut its engine, and swooped down on the three companies, releasing anti-personnel fragmentation bombs that exploded on the formation. Company B suffered the brunt of the attack. As the men scattered in confusion, the plane then circled and returned once more to drop the remainder of its ammunition. The attack came so suddenly that no one had time to even fire their weapon at the plane. Five men were killed, and 25 were wounded in this attack. Bruce was among those who were hit. He suffered a severe penetrating wound to his right upper abdomen, and a penetrating wound to his right leg. Because he was carrying the flame-thrower, he had moved his gas mask bag to his right side to allow for the additional equipment. This probably saved his life as Bruce's friend, Harlan Myers, later found his gas mask bag filled with shrapnel, having absorbed much of the blast.

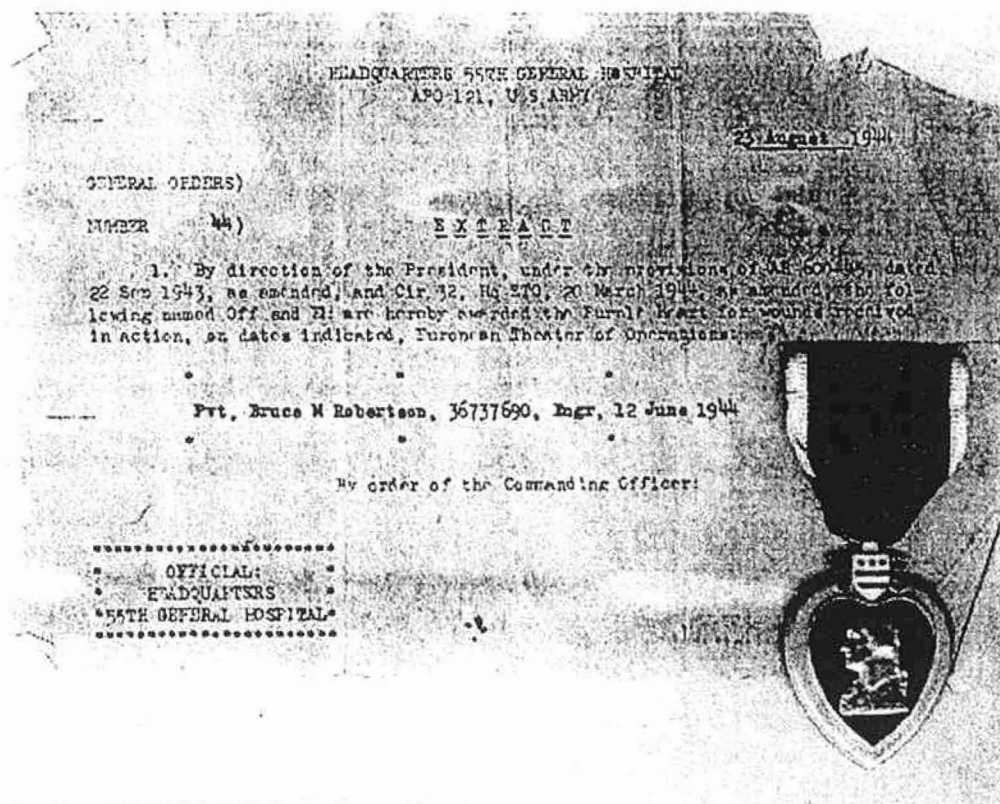
Pfc. Bruce Juneau of the Third Platoon was killed instantly. Another Third Platoon soldier, Pvt. Louis Piscoran, who was sitting next to Bruce, was severely wounded and soon died. Pvt. Ray Ambrose was hit in the hip, but survived, having been thrown to the ground by his squad leader, Sgt. Max Kolpas. The wounded were evacuated to an aid station to the rear of the battalion area. As it was night and under blackout conditions for security, the trucks transporting the wounded could not use their headlights and navigated the roads with guides posted on each fender to give directions to the drivers. Bruce was conscious during the movement to the field hospital and remembers Louis Piscoran on the stretcher beneath him in the field ambulance.



Pvt. Louis Piscoran of Company B. Killed in the attack on June 12th.

The next day, June 13th, the Germans launched their first major counterattack against the Allied beachheads. Bruce spent the 13th at a field hospital behind UTAH Beach, several miles from the fighting. He then was moved to the coast for evacuation back to England. Bruce remembered waking up on the beach between two wounded German soldiers who were also being evacuated. He discovered they were Germans when he asked one of them for a cigarette! Bruce was taken on board a British ship for transport back across the English Channel on June 14th. He recalled being given pineapple juice to drink during the crossing. He carried with him his billfold, a "good luck" 1923 silver dollar (his birth year), a bible, and a German pistol he had acquired in France as a souvenir. The pistol later "disappeared."

EPILOGUE



Purple Heart and orders for the award to Bruce M. Robertson at the 55th General Hospital for wounds received in action on June 12, 1944.

After arriving back in England, Bruce was sent to the 55th General Hospital near Malvern Hills. His family learned that he had been wounded when Bruce's father,

a railroad telegrapher, received the telegram from the War Department nearly three weeks after D-Day. Bruce underwent several operations and remained in the 55th for three months. He left England on September 17th aboard the hospital ship USS Dogwood and arrived in Charleston, South Carolina on October 3rd. He then went by train to Vaughan Army Hospital in Hines, Illinois not far from his home, for the remainder of his recuperation. On December 2, 1944, Bruce was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army with a partial disability as a result of the wounds he received in France nearly six months before. He returned to his hometown of Oregon, Illinois where he still resides today. Bruce traveled to Europe in 1983 and visited Weymouth and the battlefield in Normandy.



Bruce Robertson during a visit to the Normandy American Military Cemetery at St. Laurent-sur-Mer in 1983. The grave is that of Pfc Gerald M. Rehfeldt of the 298th who was killed on D-Day while serving with Lt. Stafford's 13-man obstacle demolition detachment on Utah Beach.

Of the 33 men of the 298th Engineer (Combat) Battalion who were killed in action during the European Campaign, 11 still rest in United States military cemeteries in Europe. Four of these soldiers, Pvt. Wayne M. Conrad, Pfc. Richard F. Geigner, Pfc. Steve J. Kish, and Pfc. Gerald M. Rehfeldt, are interred at the Normandy American Military Cemetery on the cliffs above OMAHA Beach, not far from where the men of the 298th first came ashore.

