

“RICHARD’S RAMBLINGS”

June 7, 2007

Yesterday was “D-Day” at Omaha Beach in Normandy – 63 years ago! I was still in London assigned to the Engineer Section of First U.S. Army Group (F.U.S.A.G.). I awoke at my billet – 29 Harley Street and was immediately aware of the unusually incessant drone of aircraft overhead – all headed south to the continent. Even looking from my fourth floor, east front bedroom window, I could see the sky filled with wave after wave of American and British bombers. They were all in perfect “V” formation, like flocks of geese heading south in the fall over “back home” in Iowa. The reality that “D-Day” had finally arrived brought some relief from those of us who had been involved with the hectic days and weeks of planning – but also a dreadful feeling of anxiety because we knew, all too well, how critical the first few hours and day of “Operation Overlord” was to the future of the free world!

The atmosphere at our headquarters on Bryanston Square was a curious mixture that morning because most of the intense “Top Secret” pressure was now lifted and yet there was work to be done to keep projects and plans moving forward in support of this monumental undertaking – and making new plans for “packing up” and moving the headquarters to the south of England for deployment to the (hoped-for) bridgehead behind the beaches of Normandy.* Also, by some strange coincidence, all the officers in the Engineer Section had been pre-scheduled to participate in a refresher course and firing of our 45 caliber side-arms at an outside of London military rifle range. So, we all wound up the day firing a full clip from our service automatics at dummy targets – a long ways from the real battle going on in Normandy! The bombers and fighter planes were still heading south overhead – what an awesome sight and feeling. (It’s hard to believe what was happening to this small-town (Linn Grove) farm boy from

Iowa and now 63 years later, and nearly 90 years old. The memories are still tucked away in my mind.)

*As it turned out, I was the first staff officer from the Engineer Section to set foot in Normandy – under rather unexpected circumstances. One of many factors considered critical to the success of “Operation Overlord” was the capture of the port at Cherbourg which would allow faster re-supply of the troops behind Omaha and Utah Beaches -- especially gasoline, and Cherbourg had excellent fuel-handling capability (pre-war). The building of an above ground pipeline was included in the invasion plans to carry fuel south and east to where the “Red Ball Express” could deliver it to fuel distribution points deeper into France.

One of the senior officers in the Engineer Section was from Boston and had been involved with port operations and trans-Atlantic shipping in his civilian life. So, when Cherbourg was captured late in June of 1944, it had been planned for him to go to Cherbourg to survey the port facilities and make some judgment on how long it would take the U.S. Army port operation military units to clear the blockage – sunken ships, bombed out, Gantry cranes and docks (Quays), exiting rail lines etc. – so freighters and oil tankers from the U.S. could discharge their cargo more quickly to the troops and, the harbor staff was full of mines and sunken cargo ships.

Well, when it came time for him to make the trip in late June, his chronic alcoholism and deteriorated physical condition rendered him incapable of such an assignment. So, I became the designated replacement – from landlocked Iowa and with no seafaring experience – not even in a rowboat on the Little Sioux River!

By this time in the invasion (D+25), the Army/Air Force had a daily (over and back) shuttle service to a small fighter squadron landing field above Omaha Beach. In order to catch the next flight over, I had to hastily get my field bedroll and musette bag with a change or two of underwear and socks and ever-handy “dop-kit”, and was taken to any Army operational section of what is now Heathrow Airport on the far west side of London.

The plane over the channel was a regular two-engine paratroop-drop C-3 cargo plane with a wide open pump door on the one side. We landed safely in France, amid some going and coming fighter plane traffic, and my military orders and “rank” as a Major got me some transportation to First Army Headquarters just two or three miles inland. There, the General in charge of G-4 (Supply), told me in no uncertain terms he could not furnish me a jeep and driver to get me to Cherbourg, but I should find a place to “bunk” (on the ground near a foxhole and latrine) and he would see if a supply truck was headed to the Engineer Depot established behind Utah Beach several miles away.

The next morning when I reported in, I was directed to an Army supply convoy, headed west, where I was able to ride with the driver (being an officer) and off we went. The road was jammed with military traffic and we finally arrived, through Isigny, and just east of Carenton by mid-day. Here we were delayed and waited in line for an opportunity to cross the infamous “Bridge at Carenton” that was under sporadic shelling by German artillery and mortar troops who were still on high ground to the south and could easily observe and evaluate U.S. military traffic across the bridge. (Footnotes #1 and #2)

Finally, the MP’s regulating traffic at the only “dry” water crossing between Omaha and Utah Beaches, gave us the sign to “make a run for it.” Army “6x6” trucks just didn’t move very

fast, but we took off between artillery salvos and made it safely across. After working our way through the narrow streets of Carenton, we proceeded north toward St. Mere Eglise and finally eastward to the Engineer Supply Depot near Ste. Marie De Mont.

Here, much to my surprise, we met a Captain John Miller, officer-in-charge, and remembered he and I had trained troops in the same outfit at Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky over a year earlier (in 1943). Our meeting was brief because when he learned of my mission, he “happened” to have a ¾-ton weapon’s carrier headed to Cherbourg to try and find some needed supplies. So off I went again, this time in the back of the truck – and gratefully so – to my Cherbourg destination. (Footnote #3)

Cherbourg, even today, is a picturesque, interesting port city where Queen Elizabeth/Mary ocean liners made regular passenger stops to and from English pre-war ports. The harbor was beautiful except for all the war damage from the bitter battle just a few days before. (Now July 3, 44). I was dropped off in front of a slightly damaged small hotel already commandeered for occupancy for U.S. military personnel. From the hotel I was within walking distance of the harbor facilities and soon located the military headquarters of the new “U.S. Port Authority.” After explaining my mission and the “authority (FUSAG)”, I was given free range and enlisted assistance to gather information about all the damage, hazards and operational blockage that would need to be cleared.

For a “landlubber” it was all very awesome and interesting to find out how elaborately the German “Occupation” had constructed virtually indestructible submarine “pens” well below the surface, yet accessible from the harbor as they came and went to their convoy-destroying missions into the Atlantic and the English Channel. Also, had an interesting experience with the

Mayor of Cherbourg who gave me a “tour” of his city in a U.S. Army “jeep” he had “finagled” because of his “cooperation” with U.S. military during the battle for the city. Something told me that he had also been quite “cooperative” with the German Army “occupation” – but who could blame him?

After a day or two of information gathering that I could only hope would be helpful to those who sent me – and the general consensus that it would be at least 30 days before any cargo could be off-loaded in the harbor (about right), I began looking for more “hitch-hiking” opportunities back to Omaha Beach and First Army HQS. Maybe a General Officer could have “pulled enough rank” to do otherwise, but not an Engineer Corps Major! Incidentally, I was on this mission over the 4th of July 1944 and at 11:00 a.m. on the 4th, American Artillery units all over the Cotentin Peninsula and behind Omaha Beach staged an “in your face” bombardment by simultaneous lobbing extra salvos of mortars and 75MM and 155MM shells into known enemy occupied positions. It wasn’t until July 25th; however, that a similar offensive along with massive coordinated air support did result in the famous “Breakthrough” by General Patton on his way to Paris and Germany.

My story really isn’t over because after again crossing the “Bridge at Carenton” on the way back to First Army and reporting in there and getting transportation back to the landing strip at Omaha Beach, we found all the roads hopelessly jammed with newly arrived troops that had just come across the beach. So when I arrived at the airfield, the last shuttle for the day was already at the far end of the runway waiting the signal from the “Control Tower” to take off. I, really, didn’t have any “rank to pull”, but somehow the plane was held up. I jumped in the back of a jeep (with my gear) and off we went on a wild, bumpy ride. At the plane, the not too happy

crew unceremoniously threw me and my gear on board through the big open “jump” door and off we went into the darkening night sky. (Footnote #2.)

Arriving back at Heathrow was a “blur” to say the least, but I do remember taking the “tube” back into London and getting off near “Picadilly Circus” – which was as close to Harley Street as I knew how to get!

From the station I walked back to my billet carrying my bedroll and musette bag with a strange feeling of pride and satisfaction – I had been to the Normandy Beachhead and came back safe (if not so sound) and all those “civilians” on the sidewalk around me knew nothing of what I had been through – or cared?!

Well, I’m sorry this is running late, but the next morning I was supposed to “brief” the officer who had been planned to go; however, he was again “hung over” and I was the one who had to hastily get together some maps for a “briefing” for more military “brass” than I had ever seen! Thankfully, they seemed most interested in the “30 days” part of my report so my inexperienced description of Cherbourg Harbor damage was acceptable and I was applauded for my efforts – which didn’t include much of what has been revealed here.

Even though this “mission” was not specifically mentioned, much later in the commendation accompanying the presentation of my Bronze Star Medal, no doubt it was covered by “substantial contributions to the planning and success of Operation Overlord”.

FOOTNOTES: #1) Getting to sleep that first night in a combat zone was a “challenge”. Before long, though, I realized that the already ineffective German Luftwaffe wasn’t anymore scary than the two weeks of “around the clock”, “buzz-bomb” attacks I had been surviving in London. There was the same sound of air-raid sirens and bomb explosions and anti-

aircraft tracers in the sky. One new sound, though, shortly after it got dark – the engine of a small German night reconnaissance plane flying low and slow over the beachhead. Already he (?) had the nickname “Bed check Charlie” and his regular appearance went on every night until after Patton’s “Breakthrough” on July 25th.

#2) The “Bridge at Carentan” was actually a well-built main highway bridge of steel and concrete (no overhead steel superstructure) that spanned a typical French waterways canal, only maybe 50’ wide, but with tall steep banks on both sides and a deep, barge-navigatable, bottom-close enough to the English Channel to be affected by the daily tides. It was a tactical “hot spot” and withstood days of mortar and 88MM German artillery fire.

The “bridge” also was symbolically pictured in the final scenes of “Saving Private Ryan” where Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) heroically lost his life as American troop reinforcements showed up to drive off the German counterattack on the bridge. (Not the Captain John Miller I had known at Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky.)

#3) The trip from “Utah Beach” to Cherbourg was uneventful, but I did get to see firsthand, in daylight, all the evidence of the early D-Day battles around St. Mere Eglise by the night “drop” of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. Burned and destroyed military equipment from both sides was everywhere. Parachutes remnants in trees and flooded fields, crumpled U.S. gliders still dotted the flooded swamplands, dead dairy cattle were everywhere – stinking to high heaven – and the air still had the eerie smell of death and military explosives. (This too was a long, long way from Iowa.)

#4) The Engineer Section Headquarters at Bryanston Square, just north of the famous Marble Arch at the corner of Hyde Park, was actually in two or three British

residential “flats” about three stories high that were all interconnected by knocking holes in the thick masonry walls! My “office” may have been in one of the several bedrooms common in each “flat”. It was shared with three or four other officers and two to three enlisted men, each of us having a 2’x3’ table for a “desk” – space was at a premium. The room, in which the briefing on my trip to Cherbourg was held, may have been the living room – serving as a conference room – again space was tight and I really was crowded by all those Generals and staffers from SHAEF and FUSAG! Incidentally, after we had all moved out and into the “field” in Normandy, much of that row of old flats was destroyed by a direct hit from one of Hitler’s secret weapons, a “buzz bomb”. So, when I returned to London in 1990 to retrace my wartime “steps”, all new flats had been built, but from the outside they still looked hundreds of years old – as did the original buildings.