

24-2 | Soldiers Describe D-Day Experience

Interviews with the Library of Congress Veterans History Project (2001, 2003)

The June 1944 Normandy invasion began the liberation of Europe from German control. Planned by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the amphibious assault of German-occupied France, known as Operation Overlord, resulted in the landing of 160,000 soldiers along France's coastline. Nine thousand of them died there. Their comrades, including Sergeant Claud C. Woodring and Private First Class Jay S. Adams, pushed forward, with the goal of capturing Germany and ending the war. These excerpts of interviews done as part of the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project vividly evoke the soldier's experience of war.

Interview with Jay S. Adams, July 5, 2001

The order came on the sixth for us . . . to go across the channel. . . . I went across on an LCT [landing craft tank], with my crane and my dozer on there. I was a dozer operator . . . and when we got out in the channel it got pretty rough, and I had to chain my dozer down because it was sliding down the deck. I was afraid it'd punch a hole in the side and we'd sink before we got there. [M]any of the men on the boats were . . . seasick because that channel was very rough. It was a storm, really, when we was going over, and as we approached the coastline in the morning, Navy was shelling the coast, and it was just like a fog on the coast. . . . [O]n the left, our Rangers are trying to get up the cliff there with pillboxes to step on the cliff, and we was coming right into the pillboxes, and we was

supposed to have been on the second wave, and I don't know what time we got in there and dropped the ramp, and the jeep that came off, the guy got wounded, and then the fire was so heavy that the ship's Captain backed us off and we went back out into the channel. . . . [T]he guy driving the jeep, they sent him back to the States, and he had a sister that lived in Ashtabula. He wrote his sister and told his sister about me, and she got a hold of my parents and told them where I was at. They hadn't heard from me for so long and they didn't know that—then they knew that I was in the invasion in the French coast. . . .

[W]e backed off, and then we started in again, and we got stuck on a sand bar and was kind of like that, and an 88 come in under and explode it, and they pushed our boat aside just like that, and just as we done that, three 88 shells come right in where we was at and that pushed us back out, and then we tried to get in again, and the Captain of the ship, he dropped a ramp and I looked down there, and there was a .50 caliber sticking out of the water from a half track, and I told my officer, "We can't get the dozer in until we ground it out." So he said, "I'll take care of it." So he went up to see the Captain and he says, "You gotta get him in there." To this day, I'm convinced that he pulled a gun on that ship's Captain to get him in there because what they were doing, a lot of Navy guys were dropping them off in the water, and some of the quick movers going down and drowning out, and the men were drowning out. Getting drowned with the heavy packs on because it was too far out and some of the operators had flak vests on. I had a flak vest on, and I told the officer I'd take that off right here and I'd swim ashore [but]—we'll lose our equipment. He said, "We'll get her in." And so, when we finally did get in there . . . [it was] kind of gruesome to see all the dead soldiers laying on that beach. You had to zig zag around . . . to keep from running over them. One of my other buddies, that drove a dozer, he came in. I guess he got in a little ahead of me, and he heard a shell coming in, and they jumped off, and the shell came underneath his dozer and blowed the bottom out, and he . . . had a trailer behind him with TNT in there. The only thing was left was a short piece of the tongue left. Dove, Lynton Dove, had another dozer in our Company C, and he made a pass up through there. Some way or another he got through the mine field, and filled in an antitank dish, and got up over the hill so that the traffic could get going, and he received a DSC [Distinguished Service Cross] for that. . . .

And then we kind of, took us a few days to try to get organized again and get back together, and then our job was working on the beach for quite a while. We made roads in that area, and we built loading docks for the ducks that come in. . . . [W]hile we was down there, I helped clean the mine field with my dozer, and one day as I was walking down there, to get on my dozer, something grabbed—just seemed like somebody grabbed me by the shoulder and stopped me. And when I stopped and I moved my foot aside, there's a mine about an inch and a half from being stepped on, and now God was watching over us. I tell you, it's—you can't imagine it until you have something like that happen. It's just like somebody reached up, and took a hold of you, and made you stop. Just like I'm looking out at that tree, not thinking nothing about it. Walking through there, you know. Just that quick I stopped. You know, it was, and for many instances, like just a few seconds that I shifted gears or something, and a sniper shot at me

one time, and I shifted a little quicker one time and a bullet went behind me, and a lot of different instances went on like that. Just, moving just a little bit one way or another. A lot of our—we lost I forget how many men, but quite a few of us got through it. It's a wonder any of us made it. Within a 24-hour period there was around 5,000 men killed right there on the beach, and that's not counting the wounded. I don't know how many wounded. To this day there's probably a lot of them in the hospitals that have never come out from there. . . .

[A]fter we got done there, after they got the port open, then we moved on up . . . all the way through France, and up into Belgium, and up into Holland . . . it was getting colder weather . . . and everybody sleeping in the pup tents and everything, and there's a guy came from this village. He said, "I'd like a couple guys to come and sleep in my house where it's warm tonight." . . . They were still thankful that they'd been liberated and they was free, 'cause I don't know still how many years they were under German . . . control, and they couldn't do enough for the GI's going through there, and that happened through all of the towns that we went through.

Interview with Claud Woodring, January 2, 2003

I was inducted May 6th of '43. I went to Camp Perry, Ohio. Shipped from there to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, for my basic training. Basic training was to be 13 weeks. At 11 weeks, I was shipped out of Camp Shelby, Mississippi, to Fort George G. Meade, Baltimore, Maryland. I went to a staging area somewhere [in] upstate New York. I shipped out of New York on November 2, 1943. . . . We landed in Glasgow, Scotland, on November the 9th of '43. From there I went to Dorchester, Dorset, England, assigned to the First Infantry Division Company of the 18th Regiment. . . .

All of my combat training was in England. . . . I was not a good soldier when I first went into the Army. When I went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, the first day I was taking pictures with a two-dollar Brownie camera. The company commander objected to that. We had a few words and he stomped on my camera. From then on I did not like the Army's attitude. . . . After 11 weeks, my name was posted on a shipping order. I shipped out. I did not get a three-day pass after I was inducted. I did not get a seven-day furlough after basic training. When I left home, I kissed mom goodbye, and I didn't see my mother again until after I got back after I was wounded. All of these things led up to—I developed an attitude and when I was assigned to the First Infantry Division in England I had a sergeant, Sergeant St. John, he took me aside and beat the hell out of me and convinced me I should become a soldier or I wasn't going to survive the war. He taught me to be a soldier in England. While training in England, I . . . had sniper training and demolition training. I did a lot of demolition training in anticipation of the landing. . . .

I was charged with the job of blowing up the barbed wire on the beach. That's what I trained for, specifically, along with being a foot soldier. . . . We went down to Portsmouth and we were put on LCVP, landing craft vehicle and personnel, and . . . we was on that ship all night . . . June the 5th, [the night] prior to the invasion, and when we went across the channel it was dark, of course, at

night, but it was almost wall-to-wall LCVP's landing craft. Our landing craft hit a submerged mine two, three hundred yards from shore and sunk. In the process of the ship hitting the mine, one of my buddies went overboard and I let my rifle down to help ease him up. He weighed 200 pounds, I weighed 125 pounds. He won. He was in the water with two guns, so when we abandoned the ship, so to speak, I had two bangalore torpedos and inflated our life belts . . . and we swam ashore. At this point in time it was just breaking daylight. . . .

[The trip across the channel had been] terribly rough. . . . The weather was horrible, windy rough, high waves. Ships banging against each other almost. It was so bad. . . . When I got off of the ship, I swam ashore. . . . Fully clothed with all the gear on we had and no rifle and at that point I didn't need a rifle. The day and evening before the invasion the air corps had dropped thousands of little bombs on the beach to make ready-made foxholes, which were a Godsend, so I approached the barbed wire, which is strung out in coils several layers thick. You couldn't cut one strand of barbed wire. If you did, it would fly and grab you and tear you all apart and it was impossible to cut through it. It would take too much time. We had the bangalore torpedoes which screwed together with a hand grenade detonator in it and slid them under the barbed wire, pulled the pin, ducked in a foxhole and blew a hole in the barbed wire, yards wide and all the time there's people pushing right behind you. There are thousands coming on. Probably the only reason I survived the assault on the beach was the Germans could fire into a massive crowd behind me and they weren't worried about the first person up ahead. . . .

As I remember, we were on top of the beach—on top of the sand dunes at the beach probably by two o'clock in the afternoon, maybe a little earlier than that, but at that point the beach was completely full of people and equipment and litter and the tide was coming in. . . . After we left the beaches, we got right into the hedgerow country and that was horrendous fighting, probably as difficult as the beach because of the cover they had. This hedgerow country had been there—they're little two or three acre field with hedgerows for fences. . . . Every day we ran into the enemy, whether it be Panzer or rear action—rear guard. After we got through the hedgerow country out into open country, the Germans had to travel at night because we had air supremacy. . . . As soon as it got dark, you would hear the German equipment heading towards Germany. They had a short night and can't travel very fast in the dark, consequently every day about two o'clock in the afternoon or three or noon, whatever, we would have advanced as far during the daytime as they did at night and then there would be another little war fought every day. Every day we caught the enemy and had a scrimmage. . . . The Germans that we captured, though, were conscription army, Czechs, Poles, whoever. They didn't want to fight and they [were] way—underequipped. They were still using World War I horse-drawn artillery. These people surrendered by the hundreds. One soldier could take 50 prisoners back and not have a problem. . . . The frequency and the fierceness of the fighting would decrease at that point pretty much every day because the German—hardline German soldiers were heading for Germany and they had occupation troops that were just holding

us up. They were just there to irritate us. . . . The local French people were great. If there was a sniper in a tower, they told you where he was. They were informants. They were glad to see us. They helped us in any way they could.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What perspective of war and the D-Day invasion in particular emerges from these interview transcripts? How might an account of D-Day differ if you read, for example, a report from General Dwight Eisenhower, who planned the Normandy invasion?
2. From these interviews, what can you infer about the meaning and significance of D-Day from these soldiers' perspectives? What about the invasion stands out in their memories?