



Kansans retrace their steps
from Omaha Beach to Austria

'OPERATION OVERLORD'

JUNE 6, 1944:
The gray light of dawn revealed the silent, empty beaches and the frowning, mysterious bluffs of the Normandy coast — but that was not what impressed most of the tense men who lined the railings of the troop ships.

It was the invasion fleet itself.

They were beyond counting, of course, but in fact there were 5,334 ships, including 4,126 transports. Aboard those transports were 176,475 men and 20,111 vehicles, all poised for the assault.

No one had ever seen anything like it. There had never been anything like it — and probably never will be again.

Even today, 40 years later, that fact stands out in stark relief in Harold Senne's mind.

"The number of ships that were there — how many there was!" The English Channel "was just covered with 'em," he remembers. "Every ship had balloons attached to 'em, and they were a different height to keep the Germans from comin' down and strafin' these ships."

Senne was a 24-year-old former grocery clerk from Topeka, Kan., and on June 6, 1944, he was T/Sgt. Senne, battalion operations sergeant for the 635th Tank Destroyer Bn., lying offshore of Hitler's Festung Europa. His unit, attached to the 1st Infantry Division, was scheduled to be the only TD battalion ashore on D-Day.

Thirty-three year-old Capt. Harold Pellegrino had the same reaction. "That next morning when it became daylight, we were a little ways offshore. The 1st Division was going in, and my God, all you could see in any direction was ships and barrage balloons," recalled Pellegrino, commander of the battalion's "C" Co., equipped with a dozen towed 3-inch high velocity guns.

Many of the men were still woozy from their days at sea, the big ships bobbing about like corks in the storms that already had twice forced Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander, to postpone Operation Overlord for another day.

"We loaded at Plymouth, and I think we were on there for about a week, floatin' around there in the Channel. It was rough weather, and a lot of people were seasick," recalled Ray Spangler, an ex-Topeka gas pump jockey who was then a 24-year-old platoon sergeant in "C" Co. And Capt. Dale Page, then commanding "A" Co., agreed. "It was rougher'n hell," Page said. "In fact, Ike damn' near called it off, after we were already on board ships and on the way, but it kinda cleared up there about the time we landed, and we got some good air support, too."

But Maj. Carl F. Harder, the 43-year-old executive officer to Lt. Col. Wint Smith, the battalion commander, remembers something different.

"One thing for a fella comin' out of civilian life and goin' into combat," said the former Kansas state trooper, thinking of his ride ashore in an LST (Landing Ship-Tank), "it just seems to me that war is a terrific waste of life. There's other dead soldiers that were tryin' to get on that beach before you, and they're floatin' around there dead in the water, and that's pretty nauseating."

He was talking of the Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach, where the 635th finally splashed ashore — on D + 1, when traffic in the tidal basin would permit it.

That stretch of Norman sand code-named "Oma-

ha" had been reserved for the American landing, and the Big Red One veterans who assaulted phonetically-designated Easy sector found it badly named. German heavy mortars, artillery and machine guns blazed from concrete revetments cleverly concealed in the 150-foot bluffs above, into the men splashing ashore in neck-deep water — forced to disembark there because the LSTs were blocked from coming closer by the steel German "hedgehogs" strewn like jacks in the surf.

"I remember D-Day, they took us ashore and we received quite a bit of direct artillery fire, so they backed us off," said Spangler. "We were beached, but we started gettin' a lot of artillery fire directly from those hills. In the meantime, there were other types of troops they determined should have a higher priority than we did." They went back aboard their LST, to spend another night bobbing around offshore. He paused, remembering, and added, "It was a hell of a long time ago."

When the attached 635th went ashore the next morning, the tough 1st Division infantrymen had bulldozed their way off the beach, and it was to be nearly a week before the battalion lost its first



man — but scattered enemy soldiers (and at least one French woman sympathizer) remained, holed up in strategic buildings, firing at the invasion force.

"We were lucky to be attached to a veteran division," said Pellegrino. "They'd been through the North African campaign, and they knew what it was all about."

He paused and focused his good right eye earnestly. "Combat's just like anything else. Until you fight at it a while, I'd say 15, 20 days, you really don't know what's goin' on, but with those veterans there, we did. Most of our original members who were killed were killed within the first 30 days. Replacements, a large percentage of them were killed within the first 15 days. You learn how to take care of yourself."

But the men of the battalion, if they were not combat veterans, were at least highly skilled, for 70 percent of them were former Kansas National Guardsmen who had had 3 1/2 years of Stateside training to sharpen their military skills. Indeed,

their performance in the "Z.I." was the reason they were picked for the assault, for they had been mobilized in October 1940, and had been practicing since. They were ready!

They were to spend the next 11 months in action against the enemy, with only one 10-day rest period — participating in the campaigns in Normandy, Northern France, the Rhineland, the Ardennes and Central Europe during their meandering travels. They took 4,639 prisoners, destroyed 11 enemy tanks and ended the war by penetrating farther east than any other American unit — to Steyr, Austria, where they met the advancing Russians.

The cost was two officers and 35 men killed in action or dead from battle wounds and eight officers and 194 men wounded in action, more than half of them seriously enough to call for evacuation.

Ironically, although the gun companies actually spent much of their time serving either as infantrymen themselves or as artillery support for other infantry units, they were never awarded the cherished combat infantry badge. They were, after all, not infantry.

V-E Day, May 8, 1945, found them running a P.O.W. cage in Lambach, perhaps some 15 miles west of Steyr and as far southwest of Mauthausen concentration camp (whose Polish Jews they had helped liberate), guarding an estimated 60,000 total German Wehrmacht, SS, Luftwaffe and political prisoners, attached Hungarians and Italians, displaced persons.

But that was all in the future, early on the morning of June 7, 1944.

Sweating from more than exertion and the summer sun, the men of the 635th debarked their heavy White half-tracks and their three-ton guns from the LSTs, along with the ammo trucks, the jeeps and the other equipment needed by a modern mechanized unit, wrestled them through the sand and the land mines and up a nearby road to the left, snaking through an eroded cut in the bluffs to the hedgerow-bordered fields above. It took them all day, and they spent their first night ashore in a hastily-selected field not far from the beach.

The heavy darkness of the long night was punctuated with occasional flares and shell bursts, and now and then the distant rattle of small arms fire was heard above the strong wind sighing through the trees, but the keyed-up 635th was left in peace.

The only fighting that first night was a fist fight between Sgt. Robert Van Buskirk and one of his men who had not properly obeyed his order — a spat broken up by Pellegrino, who told them to fight the enemy, not each other. "Boy, I was scared as hell that first night," recalled Pellegrino. "I was never so glad to see daylight come!"

To the 26-year-old Page, though, the worst was over already.

"The most scary thing was the landing, just sittin' there on that LST, takin' shellfire, and you couldn't do anything about it. We never were able

to land from the LST, we went off on Rhinos" — floating concrete invasion barges fitted with out-board motors, cast in England and towed across the Channel.

"They detached my company from the 1st and attached me to the 2nd Division, and I was with them for a couple of weeks because they couldn't get their heavy equipment ashore because of the wind, so I was 2nd Division artillery for 'em. I had the whole 2nd Divarty staff lookin' down my throat the whole time, which was not too good as far as gettin' somethin' done," he chuckled.

The battalion spent the first few days spread around the vicinity of Colleville-sur-Mer, not far from the beach, getting their land legs back, cleaning the protective cosmolene from their weapons and patrolling for Germans.

Sgt. Earl Blair, a 21-year-old former hardware salesman from Topeka, found them first, on June 10. Blair, then security section NCO for "C" Company's 2nd platoon, encountered them twice on a single patrol, killing five with his jeep-mounted .30-caliber machine gun, while other members of his platoon captured 10 prisoners.

"There wasn't too much to it," said Blair. "We were doin' some recon work. We came to a kind of a 'T' in the road and stopped the jeep, trying to determine where to go, and the Germans came around a corner, right into the open, actually. We were only about a block apart; three quarters of a block. I had the MG ready to go. They were prob'ly in squad strength. We went on; we didn't take no prisoners at all." But, on the way back, they bumped into another group of Germans at about the same location, and took some of them prisoner. "It was a mixed-up affair," he said.

Assigned by companies to support different infantry regiments, the 635th's three gun companies and their supporting headquarters sat in the Normandy bocage near Caumont for nearly a month, occasionally exchanging fire with German tanks and artillery and conducting small-unit infantry patrols as Allied strength built up to the break-out at St. Lo.

They lost their first man there, on June 13.

A small group of Germans flipped a potato masher grenade into a "C" Co. half-track grinding along a narrow lane, setting it afire. The crew bailed out and fled. Pellegrino, accompanied by 1/Sgt. Lowell A. Harper and trailed several paces behind by two other officers, walked forward to inspect the damaged vehicle. They were approaching it when a German gun fired in the distance, sending shrapnel spraying about the party. A fragment neatly sliced open Harper's jugular, killing him in seconds. "I was about two feet from him," said Pellegrino.

It was Pellegrino's first experience with German

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by GENE SMITH illustrations by PAT MARRIN



The late Lt. Col. Wint Smith, Mankato lawyer, Kansas Highway Patrol organizer, World War I combat veteran — and commander of the 635th throughout WWII. Smith later served as 1st District Congressman.

Young and cocky, four members of "C" Co., 635th T.D. Bn. posed in a California training camp. All four survived the war, though two officers and 35 men in the battalion did not. From left are Cpl. Joe Crandall, Sgt. Ray Spangler, S/Sgt. Richard Barber and Cpl. Earl Blair. Spangler and Blair live in Topeka, Crandall in Kansas City. Barber is believed deceased.

D-Day: Cracking Hitler's 'Fortress Europe'

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fire — but not his last. A projectile from a multiple rocket launcher, called "screaming meemies" by the Americans, burst an eardrum from a close miss near Caumont, and months later, a mortar shell came even closer.

"We were at Wagheim, Germany, at the edge of the Huertgen Forest, emplacing two TDs. The Germans were sittin' over there on top of a hill watchin' us. We'd got the guns in and I was startin' back when it happened." The mortar round impacted a yard to his right front, nearly severing a finger, blowing out both eardrums and sending fragments into his head and both eyes. "In fact, I've still got fragments in my right mastoid above my right ear. Every now and then, a piece works its way out."

That was Dec. 16, 1944, after the Americans and British and their attached "Free French" units shook themselves free of the bocage country and hammered across France and Belgium, into Germany itself, not far from Aachen — where they were forced to halt due to lack of gasoline and other supplies which had been diverted to an increasingly insistent Montgomery.

As they stood nearly in place, marking time and fighting small-unit actions, Hitler was hoarding the last of his armored might for one last grand thrust — one final blitzkrieg, known forever after as the "Battle of the Bulge," intended to smash a wedge between the British and Americans and drive clear to Antwerp or Liege.

Pellegrino was evacuated the day before the Germans opened their attack in the snowy Ardennes, his injuries earning him a three-month hospital stay and nearly a trip back to the U.S. for further treatment.

When he heard what they planned, he went A.W.O.L. from his Paris hospital bed, walked two miles to the nearest Army post office facility and hitched a ride in the first 635th truck he found — resuming command of his company April 3, 1945.

By then, of course, the battalion had seen a lot of roads — and a lot of war. Lt. Joe LaCroix, who had succeeded Pellegrino, also had been severely wounded and evacuated. The Battle of the Bulge had come and gone. The battalion had rampaged through parts of Belgium and the Rhineland and currently was engaged in mopping up fleeing Germans in Bavaria, heading for Austria.

Already there had been a series of frightening, triumphant, tragic, comic, bitter and insignificant experiences, some of which are flooding back to these aging veterans now as they ponder their life's great adventure on the eve of its quaternary anniversary.

"The times I can remember most is drivin' down the roads in France, and all those nice young mademoiselles comin' out to give you a big kiss," said Spangler. "We got some real friendly greetings." There was, he implied, one thing wrong: "The rest of the guys got kissed by the girls — and I got kissed by the old men!"

There was Mike Sarraas of Kansas City, who lied about his age and joined the Guard at 16, then a 21-year-old first sergeant in "B" Co., shot in the mouth in a fire fight at a little town in Luxembourg and evacuated.

"I was out on a reconnaissance. We were then up ahead of all the divisions. We would go along the highways 'til we ran into some resistance, clean out the resistance and go on. We had lost contact with one of our platoons, so the driver and I and the company commander were goin' over a hill and about a platoon of Germans were at the bottom, and they started firin' at this sergeant and I."

The bullet struck him in the left cheek, went through his mouth, exited just below his right ear and passed through his right shoulder. Sarraas fired his machine gun as the driver reversed back over the hill. Because of the speed of the Allied advance, he had to be evacuated by road 150 miles for treatment, and spent a year in various hospitals.

There was Pvt. J. A. Hoagland, struck in the right testicle by a fragment when a German artillery shell landed near his patrol in a French valley. Hoagland, embarrassed, got a nearby medic to bind up his wound — and refused the award of the Purple Heart so he wouldn't have to explain where he was hit.

There was the American B-17 bomber, crashed-landed in a field behind enemy lines, which they were ordered to destroy to prevent it falling into enemy hands.

There was the terse "C" Co. report: "1130 hrs. 7 Oct. planes which strafed their area were (American) P-47s (Thunderbolt fighter-bombers) with Allied striping but obviously manned by enemy pilots as strafing continued although red panels displayed on vehicles."

There was the freak injury sustained by Pvt. Charles Frost, "C" Co., curled in his log-covered foxhole when a German plane dropped anti-personnel bombs. One exploded on the logs, spreading them apart. A succeeding dud bomb fell into the hole, striking Frost in the small of the back and causing his evacuation.

There was the equally freak escape of Sgt. H. A. Matthews, "A" Co., who was barely scratched (but considerably bruised) when four enemy fighters strafed the company command post area. A machine gun bullet bored through his field jacket, sweater, shirt and Bible in his left breast pocket, spending nearly all its energy. He remained on duty.

There were Lt. John B. Thompson and his 3rd

platoon, and he decided against that. I know many times he would get orders that he was to report to such and such a place and take over a bigger unit, but he always got out of it. He'd go talk to the general."

One result, of course, was that promotions were rare in the 635th, and many men — perhaps most — were discharged in the same rank they carried at D-Day.

There was the April afternoon Williams' "A" Co. 2nd platoon fired 17 cannon shells and 500 rounds of machine gun ammunition into Reichsfeldmarschall Hermann Goering's elaborately-appointed castle and surrounding buildings at Neuhaus, Germany. The battalion log explains enemy small arms fire was coming from the area, and added simply, "firing neutralized."

There was Lt. Glen W. Horman, a South Dakota sheep rancher and an "A" Co. platoon leader, already wounded in a massive German bombing raid near St. Lo which killed a fellow lieutenant and wounded some 500 other soldiers, who earned

the Distinguished Service Cross — the nation's second highest award for valor — for personally silencing two machine guns at a little mountain village in western Germany.

"People don't think about it at the time," said Horman. "Had I thought about it, it was a rather foolish move. I had a whole battalion of infantry behind me, and to run out there was rather foolish."

The battalion after-action report summed up: "At 0830 hrs 23 Apr the 4th Platoon supporting the 1st Bn. cleared a number of road blocks at coord 910910 in vicinity Hausen, Germany with half-track winches. At 0900 hrs the 1st Bn's advance was held up by a number of Germans manning a machine gun in a house. 1st Lt. Glen Horman, Platoon Commander, armed himself with a Thompson SMG, had his ¼ ton driver cover him with a .50 cal MG and without aid entered the house. The enemy fire was extremely heavy and Lt. Horman ran out of ammunition, returned to his ¼ ton for an additional supply of .45 cal. ammunition and again returned to the house firing his weapon steadily. He mortally wounded two enemy and took 17 prisoners at the same time knocking out the enemy machine gun nest, enabling the battalion of infantry to advance. Ammunition expended 100 rds .45 cal. and 110 rds .50 cal MG. Lt. Horman recommended for the DSC by the 66th Inf Rgt."

Horman explained, "I had a Thompson submachine gun with the stock sawed off, and I got a lucky shot at the machine gunner. Then I ran into the house; I think I shot one more fella." Coming under fire from a second gun in an adjoining connecting house, he ran outside and fired into that one as well, finally using the jeep's machine gun to do so.

"They had me surrounded, but they didn't know it," he recalled. "There were some behind me in the barn. But that .50 put the fear into 'em."

There was Spangler's 6:30 a.m. capture that same day of a major and three other German soldiers in a hotel in Amberg. "We were lookin' for billets," he explained. "They were up there with some gals. They didn't give us any trouble. They had their pants off."

There was S/Sgt. Jerry Workman, a once and future farmer from Burlingame, Kan., charging alone onto an airfield firing his .45 pistol to halt a German aircraft which had just landed and now, seeing the Americans, was trying to take off again.

"We were in this woods lookin' down this road," said Workman, a self-effacing man who had earned the Silver Star a few months earlier for leading a patrol that neutralized two machine gun nests, capturing 22 Germans and securing a vital bridge crossing. "That's when he come down and lit, and he had his hind end towards me, and I run out there from the rear. He seen me and tried to take off, but they seen these men a-comin', and that's what caused 'em to give up. It wasn't really what I did — it was all the men behind me."

"It was kind of a dumb fool thing to do, really."

And there was Mauthausen concentration camp — an open pus pocket in the picture-postcard setting of the Austrian Alps. "It was a terrible sight," said Blair of the "living skeletons" they found. "They all had lice, but they wouldn't go to the showers, because they were afraid they'd be gassed. That's the way the Germans did it. You could hardly feed 'em anything. They'd gulp it down and just retch it right back up."

There was the meeting with the Russians at the river Enns near Steyr.

And there was, finally, the P.O.W. cage, which the unit took over on May 7, 24 hours before the official end of the European war.

"It was one of those deals," Workman summed up, "where you wouldn't take anything for the experience — but you wouldn't wanta do it again."

There'll be a big ceremony on Omaha Beach Wednesday, to mark the 40th anniversary of the landing, but only one man of the 635th will be there to represent it: Carl Condon, of Bismarck, N.D. Instead, on Sept. 24, between 40 and 45 unit members will fly to Paris to begin a tour which will revisit all the old battlegrounds, returning Oct. 11.

The choice this time has as much to do with the likely availability of hotel accommodations as anything else.

This time, they're not sleeping in the open — in the snow and cold!



Trucks, supplies, debris and dead men littered the Normandy shoreline of "Omaha Beach" the morning of June 7, 1944, when the bulk of the 635th splashed ashore from these LSTs after crossing the Channel aboard the troop transport in the background.

platoon of "A" Co., who unwittingly blunted the advance of an attacking German armored column when they set up their three guns in Humain, Belgium, under orders to seize and hold Humain in concert with a cavalry reconnaissance squadron.

Arriving in Humain about 1:30 a.m. Christmas day, Thompson found a German Mark V "Panther" tank, a half-track and a truck out of gas and abandoned in the streets. He destroyed them and set up his defense, completing that task two hours later. Thirty minutes later, at 4 a.m., he and his men found themselves engaged with another Panther (destroyed) and 30 German infantry. Two more Panthers rolled up and likewise were knocked out.

Thompson had no way of knowing it, but he and his men were directly in the path of point elements of the German attack — part of the Battle of the Bulge. Also, most of the U.S. cavalrymen had withdrawn. He didn't know that, either.

Eventually, having sustained seven wounded (plus two from the cavalry) and with all its ammu-