By Herb J Levy
my room mate
at Duke

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Few of even my own generation were involved in the invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944, in Normandy, France, at a place code-named Omaha Beach. This event began the final destruction of the Third Reich.

My family has requested that I attempt to record something of my own feelings and experiences that are indelibly stamped on my mind for so long as it may function. These were experiences that nobody ever sought, and few had the great good fortune to narrate in retrospect.

My part was trivial in the "big picture"— a perspective that included a few of the trees and little, if any, recognition of the forest. A chronological account seems the logical approach.

The 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion cannot lay claim to traditions and a long history in the annals of American military involvement. Rather, it was a product of the necessity of creating a highly trained, modern and efficient army in a minimal time frame.

The Third U.S. Army ordered the activation of the 81st at Fort D.A. Russell, Marfa, Texas, in March 1942. Five newly commissioned "90-day wonders" from the 1st Officers Candidate School of the Chemical Warfare Service—including me— and 76 enlisted men were ordered from Edgewood Arsenal, Md., to serve as a cadre for the new organization.

Equipment and training aids were scarce and inadequate, and time was spent in physical conditioning and basic military training when the full complement of personnel arrived in mid-October. Improvisation was by necessity the order of the day. the basic weapons—the 4.2' mortars– were not received until October '42, and the first actual, very limited firing was done in January 1943.

After training at Camp Polk, La., and Camp Gordon Johnston, Carrabelle, Fla., the battalion was moved in June 1943 to the overseas staging area of Camp Pickett, Va., where training in the use of secondary weapons was carried on, and the first 4.2' high explosive shells were fired. One week later we of D Company boarded the Queen Mary for an unknown destination and purpose. At this time, I was a platoon commander.

The Queen Mary, unescorted other than by air—to the limits planes could accompany us—transported some 18,000 of us GIs to the Firth of Clyde, and Glasgow, Scotland. The Mary's speed (we completed the crossing in five days, even with the zig-zagging intended to confuse German subs, which could only get a shot at us by lying in wait) was our principal protection for most of the crossing. Bunks were assigned to the men for 12-hour shifts; there was around-the-clock feeding to provide each person two meals per day; and fresh water was available only for cooking and drinking.

Most of us officers would have rejected serious consideration of the possibility of submarine attack except for the presence of a handful of British officers who assiduously filled their canteens, inspected their life preservers, and complied with all safety instructions.

The knowledge that their previous transport had been sunk out from under them had a very sobering effect on us non-believers.

After disembarking in Glasgow, we were loaded on a train and transported to the vicinity of Ilfracombe, North Devon, on the Bristol Channel. Further training of various types followed, especially amphibious training. Every other day we loaded our mortars—along with

infantry troops— onto LCVPs (landing craft vehicular-personnel—the little bitty, rough-riding babies, brought in on assault transports). We should have had pneumonia, but that would have been the easy way out. We did not know when or where the Channel crossing would take place, but we damn well knew that, whenever and wherever, we would be among the first ashore.

We and the remainder of the 81st (which had landed in England in November and was stationed in the Midlands) participated in increasingly large and complex amphibious exercises in the Dartmoor area of southern England. The other three companies of the 81st were moved close to Plymouth from where the invasion fleet of V Corps 1st U.S. Army was to sail.

In April '44, I was transferred to B Company as company commander—coded "Van Dyke Baker Six." We finally had sufficient ammo to do intensive firing, utilizing the field artillery method of observation and control. All of this time England was being kept afloat by the barrage balloons which were unaffected by the incessant rain.

During an exercise at Slapton Sands shortly after our being reassigned to our battalion, German "E Boats" managed to get into the middle of ships involved and wreaked havoc. Upward of 1,000 Americans lost their lives in an episode held secret by wartime censorship. A memorial to those people was dedicated within the last two years. In this again, Providence was watching over me.

On May 12, we were alerted to the invasion, and the assault group of the battalion moved into the marshaling area near Dorchester. Our battalion assault group consisted of 437 men and officers.

The vehicles and materiel concentrated in every bit of concealment, camouflaged in the open, and in every hedgerowed lane was mind-boggling. There were the follow-up tanks, trucks, artillery guns, ammunition, and field hospitals. Although comforting to think of all this support, it began to create a lonely, sinking sensation—the idea that all of this would come behind, but assuredly would not be ahead.

I was not chaffing at the bit to be first—but an even stronger feeling was a determination to conceal that anxiety from my command.

Our battalion remained intact until Sunday, May 28. During this time in the marshaling area, everyone was given a final and complete briefing on "Operation Overlord."

On May 28 we were broken up into assault combat units and attached to the two regimental combat teams scheduled to be the point of the invasion—the 16th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division and the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Division under command of the 1st Division. One of our 4.2' companies was assigned to each of the four assault battalions—we of Company B to the 1st Bn. of the 116th.

The entire forward assault echelon was moved to Weymouth Harbor on June 1 and 2, where we embarked on the various invasion craft (B Company to a British APA, the Empire Javelin). With each move, that lonely feeling in the pit of the stomach intensified.

The invasion was set for June 5 but postponed 24 hours because of the miserable weather. We spent 96 hours aboard our ships on the choppy waters of the English Channel. H-Hour was to be at 6:30 a.m. June 6, 1944—and there was too much time to think.

The infantry battalion commander (our assault team was shiploaded together) asked if I wanted to accompany him in his Headquarters LCVP in order to better coordinate, but I decided to send my executive officer and stay with our mortar personnel on the possibility of things not developing according to plan. Not incidentally, the infantry battalion commanders' craft took a direct hit from a large caliber shore-based artillery, and there were no survivors.

The invasion fleet was immense and awe-inspiring—ships seemed to assemble from every direction, and the air traffic was continuous—going east (flight paths returning were north of us). There was nearly no interruption from the Luftwaffe, although anti-aircraft crews on all transports stayed at their weapons on the alert. We were fed a last good hot meal—but who could eat? All too soon Empire Javelin came to a stop in the forward transport assembly area and began lowering the LCVP's for the last long run to the beach.

We welcomed the concentration required in off-landing men and weapons by cargo net into the pitching, bucking small craft. Moving away from the high steel leeward side of the APA was an eerie feeling—like leaving home for a long journey with no plans to return.

We *rendezvoused* with the other LCVPs, in our wave of landing craft, a few hundred yards nearer the beach, and began our seemingly endless circling awaiting instructions for our deployment into line and movement to the beach. The water was very choppy, and a large number in our boat became actively seasick. Finally, the visual signal from the command boat sent us toward the beach.

As far as the eye could see, the invasion armada was spread around us. Behind the transports, naval ships of the line maintained incessant fire in the dune lines and still occupied German fortifications. It was not until much later that we learned that a complete German division was at Omaha on maneuvers augmenting the regular holding garrison—and here we came!

The LCVPs scurried around like water bugs, and overhead, the Flying Fortresses and Liberators continued close-in pounding aimed at isolating the landing area, as well as neutralizing strong points, while fighter planes kept the Luftwaffe away from the area.

As we began our run for the beach, features of the terrain became gradually more distinct and flashes from our bombardment and their counter-fire grew in intensity and visibility along with the tumult of sound. At a few hundred yards from the line of underwater obstacles (each with a deadly land mine attached) which detonated with the slightest scrape, we began to receive the first of the rounds fired at us in anger and not for training purposes. It was now obvious that all the plans were not functioning as we had been told.

The relatively small numbers of GIs ashore were pinned down at the water's edge and all of us were under small arms fire. The early waves of engineers had been unable to clear sufficient lanes throughout the obstacles, which were much more effective than had been intimated in training, so we were forced to move down beach, parallel to the shoreline, searching for a cleared lane to the beach.

About this time, our LCVP barely nudged a land mine. It exploded, wounding a couple of men in the bow and causing the craft to take on water alarmingly. We got another of our company's LCVPs alongside, transferred all men and weapons, but shed our packs.

Another of our LCVPs was hit by artillery and a transfer of men and weapons again was effected some 1,000 yards offshore with still another of B Company's LCVPs.

Eventually, we located a cleared path to shore, and the craft moved as far in as possible before grounding on a sandbar.

All of this time it was as if I were a spectator rather than an active participant, apart from what was occurring, yet mechanically responding. It was as if the mind was overloaded with the enormity of all the external events—completely beyond our control, yet somehow functioning by rote.

The water became shoulder high on the beach side of the bar, and many men, overloaded with equipment, drowned.

It was a sickening experience to push through numerous bodies and abandoned equipment to the minimal shelter of a slight rise at the high-water line.

You never got used to seeing American casualities, although the German dead and wounded didn't upset us.

We had been scheduled as the fourth wave—behind the engineers and first two waves of infantry (close-in support units) to touch shore at H-Hour plus 10 minutes. Time seemed interminable and really at a standstill. Gradually, the number of men at the waterline (living, wounded, dead) increased. We were receiving small arms enfilade fire as well as artillery—long since zeroed in on the beach. For quite a long time, the additional buildup of our personnel on the beach was halted as nowhere had we penetrated the barbed-wire obstacles and the anti-personnel-strewn dune lines beyond.

The frightening thought—not expressed—was, "Had this been a feint?" Were we expendable, and was the real effort elsewhere? There was very little pleasant to behold, imagine, or contemplate at this point in eternity. In combat, the "bit picture" is—at best—hazy. You are too involved in the frantic excitement of your personal situation to be concerned with any strategy. Your thoughts are utterly basic and simplistic; to do your assignment and to stay alive.

Believing that it was better to be killed inland than at the water's edge, trickles of men moved up the steep face of the dune line—the leaders replaced by the next in line after being killed or disabled by anti-personnel devices.

Heroism was commonplace, but there was no alternative. It is easy to be selfless when there seems to be no self. We too moved across what then seemed an expanse of beach, and up the narrow tape-marked path off the beach—at times through uncleared mine fields. We established a firing position on a shelf-like path some 20 feet below the rim of the dunes—and within 100 yards of the front-line infantry. We cleared the shelf of land mines and warned all personnel not to move out of the very tight area. (A couple of our people did not heed, but after two casualties, no further warnings were required.) Many wounded died who would have been saved if evacuation had been possible.

Nine of B Company men and two officers were killed in the initial phase—a rate in excess of 10 percent of the assault group—but far fewer than most of the units we supported, It turned out that I was the only one of the four company commanders of the 81st who survived D-Day.

Late in the afternoon—although not long after we established a mortar-firing position—our first round against the enemy was fired on a machine-gun emplacement in the woods near St. Laurent-sur-Mer. Our fire direction units were in place with the infantry we supported, although limited ammunition availability necessitated a low rate of fire.

Of the assault vehicles of our company, only one jeep made it ashore, with one additional person killed and two men and an officer wounded. As a result of the loss of our vehicles, it was 10 days before any of us in B Company had toilet articles or any change of clothing.

Perhaps one of the most unforgettable things connected with the landing was the horrible, prevalent, and unmistakable stench of dead people and animals. This we lived with most of the time.

Our position above the beach and below the top of the dune line was like a grandstand seat at a spectacle we would have preferred not to watch. We were reasonably sheltered from direct weapons fire, except from the few still-occupied fortifications.

Nazi air activity increased markedly after dark—both bombing and strafing. The greatest worry to us was the enormous barrage con-

centrations put down by our navy on the German strong points still in action. Not only did occasional strays come our way, but directed fire was hitting within 250 yards of our position with shrapnel landing beyond us. There was great incentive to keep down and dig in.

Slowly but steadily we could see incoming activity pick up on the beach as men and materiel were landed. We began to see insignia that were different—but, oh, so welcome! Counterattacks were heavy and numerous; the beachhead was fiercely fought, and narrowly won. We finally got two 6x6 trucks to handle our ammunition supply on June 9. At this time, we were supporting the 5th Ranger Battalion in cleaning out the coastal fortifications still operating.

After a couple of days, we were reattached to the 116th Infantry for an attack on enemy paratroops in the Bretel Woods. The front line moved forward slowly—from hedgerow to hedgerow.

About this time, we noted unusual activity in a field just behind us but received a call for fire support that concentrated our full attention on what we had at hand to do. After we fired a few rounds, a "bird colonel" came running up to order me to move before we attracted counter-battery fire to the vicinity, as 1st Army was setting up its initial headquarters in France next to us.

Just then, Gen. Omar Bradley (with all four of his stars in evidence) happened to come by and overheard enough of the conversation to say, "Colonel, if anybody moves, it's going to be us. These people are helping the cause. What are you doing?" I've always loved Gen. Bradley.

On June 17, First Army orders were issued listing the 81st Battalion as one of the units eligible for the distinguished unit citation for extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in the initial landing on the coast of France.

It was great to see our tanks and artillery appearing in the slowly widening beachhead, and moving into the line. On the 11th of July, the final attack was begun on Hill 192, the gateway to St. Lo. From the crest of Hill 192, you could see back approximately 10 miles to the beach. It had been a hard and bloody advance. the capture of St. Lo and the subsequent breakthrough on July 25 marked the end of the beachhead segment of WWII.

By way of a personal postscript, I returned to Normandy and Omaha Beach in late September 1987 for my first and only visit. It was a tremendously emotional experience and rekindled memories and feelings long dormant. I could determine within 100 yards just where we had come ashore and set up. Faces, thoughts, sounds and happenings came flooding back—many I did not want resurrected.

We visited the American Cemetery high on the Norman hills overlooking Omaha Beach and a more serene, appropriate, immaculate, and peaceful setting I cannot imagine. A memorial stands at the north end where you enter the cemetery, a semi-circular colonnade in an arch, above which was inscribed: "These Endured All and Gave All That Justice Among Nations Might Prevail and That Mankind Might Enjoy Freedom and Inherit Peace."

In the middle distance, dividing the long avenue of lawn, stands a small circular chapel. Above this was inscribed: "This Embattled Shore, Portal of Freedom, Is Forever Hallowed by the Ideals, Valor, Sacrifices of Our Fellow Countrymen." How well are these lessons learned and remembered?

The manicured lawn extends south for a great, immaculate length to a low rock wall—with 9,386 white crosses and stars on either side of the lawn. At the far end—through a gap in a copse of pine—above the wall, you can see a small ancient church spire in the distance. This

distant spire is the steeple of the parish church at Vierville-sur-Mer, the place at which my company was to have exited Omaha Beach on D-Day.

It took me 43 years to get there, and as I had been told, embedded in the churchyard wall was a bronze tablet erected in appreciative memory of the 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion.

It was comforting to me to see a large number of French families quietly and respectfully strolling through the garden-like grounds on a beautiful sun-splashed Sunday afternoon. Also, fellow Americans of all ages—as awed and subdued as we—shared our pride and mourning.

The American supervisor of the National Monument seemed like an old, lost friend. He knew all about my outfit. It was he who told us of the tablet at Vierville, and where all of my people who remained (many bodies were returned to the states at the request of family) were interred.

Standing there in appreciation, sadness, and long-postponed grief, I could only wonder: "Why not me?"

Jim Levy
Obituary
March 2015

Montgomery community leader, WWII hero Jim Levy remembered as a humble man Alvin Benn

(click for more information)

Jim Levy was remembered Friday as a humble man who served his country and community in times of war and peace and never lost his sense of service.

Levy, who died Thursday at the age of 94, was an army officer who took part in the Normandy invasion and several other campaigns. He returned home with three bronze stars, a Purple Heart and other military decorations.

When he returned to Montgomery after the war, Levy switched from combat conditions to civic responsibilities and set an example of what leadership is all about as he played key roles in numerous community activities.

"You run out of adjectives when you mention Jim Levy," Montgomery business entrepreneur Mike Jenkins said. "He has left behind a clear picture of what it means to be a servant."

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Monday at Temple Beth Or following visitation that begins an hour earlier.

Montgomery historian Ed Bridges said Levy's ability to master so many different aspects of life made him a remarkable man.

"Jim was a complete man who excelled in almost every facet of life and managed them all with extraordinary grace, wisdom and self-deprecating humor," Bridges said.

Levy, Bridges and Jenkins were members of "The 13," a Montgomery literary group that focused on the latest best-sellers that would be read and discussed at length.

Bridges said Levy never mentioned his D-Day involvement "and when we found out, we began to interrogate him, asking questions about what he went through."

That's when Levy opened up, retracing his landing craft's bumpy ride through the surf when it nudged a mine that exploded, sending the troops over the side and onto another boat.

A captain who commanded a mortar battalion, Levy led his men toward the shore in the first wave — trying to keep them calm as German machine gunners peppered the boat. In many cases, troops aboard landing craft at Normandy never made it out alive. They died inside as enemy gunners gunned them down.

At the age of 24, Levy was the "old man" of his unit. Many of his troops were still teenagers wondering if they'd ever see 20.

H. F. "Jim" Levy of Birmingham, Alabama, receiving a Bronze Star earned during his Army service in World War II.

(click for more information)

Levy, the captain of a mortar company, earned several Bronze Stars. He was present at the D-Day invasion on Omaha Beach, and he saw combat in France and Germany. After the war he moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he founded the SADCO, Inc., a furniture and electronics distributorship.