

Bistrica

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My name is John E. Bistrica. I am an American born November 9 1923 of Croatian ancestry in Youngstown, Ohio. I graduated from high school in June 1942. September 1942, I went into a defense plant. I was an assembler, tact welder, in building bailey bridges, and treadway bridges. Little did I know that I would be crossing these types of bridges 20 months later.

In October 1942 I was drafted. I was not called up until March of 1943. I went to Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio induction center. It was there where three of us G.I.'s escorted the Andrew Sisters to their housing after the show. From there I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky in armored infantry and learned how to drive half tracks, trucks, and other vehicles. I ended up being a T-5 jeep driver with the 528th Armored Infantry Battalion. I stayed in Fort Knox until August of 1943 where the unit was broken up. All privates and P.F.C.'s went to the west coast. All other non coms, others ratings went to Fort Meade, Maryland. I stayed at Fort Meade until October. I had a good time at Fort Meade, Maryland. They had a place called Boon Town. I think I had the best hamburger ever there.

At the end of October we went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. I think it was the 3rd week of November we boarded ferries at the

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port of embarkation, New York City. We boarded an English ship named the HMS Rangaticky. It was a summer cruiser between New Zealand and Australia. It had just come up from Argentina. It was the same ship that Ernie Pyle sailed on for the invasion of Africa. We left the port at night. I think there was about 400 of us G.I.'s aboard. We were on the flag ship of a convoy of about a hundred ships. The weather was bad. After a few days out a lot of G.I.'s were sick. We had several submarine scares. I don't know if we lost any ships or not. We had boat drill every day. The food was terrible. It was English. If it wasn't for the Oreo cookies, Coca Cola, and the jelly rolls that we had bought from the cooks I think we would have gone hungry. The food was a lot of mutton and potatoes. Also we had the white candy bars, nestles brand that came up with the ship from Argentina. We ate on tables and slept on hammocks in the same area.

On the other ship across the way there was a bunch of wac's and nurses. One day it was my turn to go down below to pick up the food. When I got to the galley I saw a sailor standing in a giant coffee urn. In his bare feet he was cleaning the container. After seeing this, I didn't feel like eating too much. We were on the ship about 15 days. The convoy split up into four groups as we got close to Ireland. Our ship went to Liverpool, England. After calling our names off we boarded trucks and were taken to Pheasy Farms Replacement Depot. From there we went to the 10th Replacement Depot, in Litchfield, England. From there we were

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trucked to Blanford which was headquarters, 1st Division. From there the trucks took us to Lyme Regis, England, to C Company, the 16th.

I think there was about 20 of us when we arrived at C Company Headquarters. There was a short Sergeant who was in charge. The first thing he asked was our names and then where was our gas mask. I moved the purse like bag off my shoulder and showed it to him. He said, that was a ladies purse. I opened it and showed him the gas mask. He was surprised. He also saw our two buckle combat boots. He wanted to know why they weren't shined. I told him they were inside out leather and couldn't shined. All he said was shine them. We were the first troops to come to C Company with that type of equipment. Well, Sergeant Nendza and I today are the best of friends. We phone each other and we see each other at our 1st division reunions.

We started training for D-Day in January and February. We had three landings near Slapton Sands. From there we went to Barnstaple for dry runs. It was cold, damp. I think it was the third week in May we left to Lyme Regis and went to a D camp near Weymouth. We were cut off from everyone. No letters and no mail at all. There was nothing to do but keep checking equipment. Just before we left the D camp it was either May 30 or somewhere on the second of June, we had a shake down looking for things we weren't suppose to have, like a camera. I buried my camera outside the tent during the inspection.

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We boarded trucks, went to Weymouth, Harbour. The landing craft took us the S.S. Samuel Chase. We climbed up rope ladders to get up on the ship. Nothing to do on the ship. Some played cards, others just roamed around, others were reading the French book to learn how to speak some French words. We asked the Sergeant what it was going to be like and that we were scared. He said he was scared too. We wanted to know what was going to happen. He said you'll see.

One day I had to go down, with Bob McKeown to see the large relief map. It was fantastic. It had all the roads, houses, hedgerows, valleys. It was made of rubber and it was in natural color of the ground, water, streets, roads, etc. It was made in camp Lee, Virginia, I think in 1943. I had to go down with him because I was assistant radio operator for D-Day. I knew radio code. We had to look at the map to find the E-1-E-3 draws see Easy Red Beach. I think the pass word for D-Day was Mickey Mouse. On the Chase I made friends with a sailor. I think he was from Pennsylvania or Ohio.

We had a good meal on June 4. That evening I got hold of the sailor. He gave me sandwiches with white bread, fruit and cake. I had to give up my G.I. blanket for all of this. I threw out all of my K rations. I put the food in K Ration boxes and covered them. We listened to the officers over the P.A. system. We were getting ready to get under way, then it was called off for one day. I think this caused more stress and discussion. On June 6 at one

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hundred hours I think I was still trying to get some sleep when they woke us up at 0300. We were awakened and told to put on our assault jackets.

I was a rifleman. I had impregnated clothes, assault jacket, with large pockets and built in pack. I had an assault water proofed gas mask worn on chest and M-1 rifle, bayonet, trench knife, shovel, 3 bandoleers of ammo, 4 smoke grenade, six fragmentation grenades, a pouch of six rifle grenades plus my special sandwiches and D-bar. Also a double life preserver which was inflated with co2 cartridges. As I headed for the landing craft a sailor said I wish I was going. I snapped off my assault jacket and gave it to him. He simply walked away. I put my jacket back on.

I was with Bob McKeown going on the landing craft. I told him to hang on to that 300 pack radio. Then I asked the Sergeant again what it was going to be like. I told him I was scarred. He said he was too. He just said watch your step and watch where you are going and you will be all right. It was dark, rainy, damp morning as we got into the landing crafts. Some G.I.'s were already getting sea sick. They gave us bags to puke in. We were lowered down in the water, pulled away from the ship. You could see the battle wagons firing and the planes overhead. We went a little distance and then we started circling. The waves were already breaking over the landing craft. We started forward into the beach. The Sergeant told the boatmen to get us as close as he

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could. As we came in you could hear the shells from the ships over head. You swear you could touch them. As we got closer you could hear the German 6 barrel mortar screaming like a bunch of lions. We called them screaming me'me's. As we moved in the boatmen said this is as far as he could go and he was going to drop the ramp.

Before getting off I took my protective cover off my rifle and left it near a life preserver at the right side of the craft. The G.I. behind me said he wasn't going to take the other reel of wire with him. If you look at one of those famous D-Day pictures they show all the time you'll see what I'm talking about. On the right side of the craft you'll see a cover and behind it a reel of wire. Also in the middle front you'll see a tank. I remember seeing this tank and it was number 9. This photo according to the books and records said that this landing craft was from the Samuel Chase AP 26. But no way I can prove that this was the landing craft I was on. If you see the first G.I. on the front toward the right it was me.

As we got off we were in knee deep water. As we moved in we went down over our necks. We had come on into a false beach. I dragged my rifle and came out of the water and toward the beach I saw 2 G.I.'s laying against the hedgehogs. They were both dead. They must have been combat engineers. You could feel the machine gun and rifle fire. A little way down you heard a shell hit a landing craft. We finally got up on the beach on what they called shale. We hit the ground. I was by myself when all of a sudden a

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G.I. came up, he hit the ground too, and said, "I'm hit and I can't breath." His problem was that he had his preserver on too high and too tight, and it was squeezing the breath out of him. I took my trench knife and I poked a hole in it and he was fine. I guess it seemed like we were laying there forever.

Looking back you could see more men coming in, equipment and men floating onto the beach. It was one big mess. We were completely disorganized. Nothing like the practice at Slapton Sands. You could see the engineers and demolition men blowing up the wire and the hedgehogs, and trying to clear a path from the beach up to the draw. The beach was now being crowded with people. The shelling seemed to be heavier. The mortars were really screaming. It looked like we were never going to move. I couldn't see any C Company men around. I saw an officer go up to the tank and he banged on it and told them to fire but I guess they were dead. A little way down on my left someone was hollering about "There are two kinds of guys on the beach, those that are dead and those that are about to die. Let's get the hell out of here".

It looks like after that the Sergeants and Lieutenants got the troops together. I found later that our 16th commander Colonel Taylor said these words. As I started to move up toward the draw I saw some G.I.'s. Near the draw I saw a Lieutenant, it was Lieutenant Scott, my platoon leader. He was hit in the shoulder. He waved and a couple of us started up the path. It was lined with white tape. The engineers were clearing through the mine fields.

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As I kept going there was a G.I. in front of me. Up in front of him there was an explosion. A mine went off and an engineer lost his leg. As I got up further I spotted a German blanket. I said "oh boy, I'll stay warm tonight". I picked it up but I dropped it because there were two dead Germans under it.

Going up the path I caught up with a G.I. He was from G Company and we walked together. He was looking for his platoon and I was looking for C Company. The firing around us had almost stopped. We reached the top of the knoll and then went across the open mine field. We came down a path between some hedgerows. We passed a house and there the G Company man found some of his men. So I moved along a hedgerow. Up ahead of me I saw a G.I. he looked liked our BAR man from the 3rd platoon, ~~S~~^{JACOB} He was leaning against a hedgerow. I was going to holler at him but I changed my mind. I came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. He did not move. I came around to his face side and he had a bullet through his right temple. A sniper had got him. I tapped him on the shoulder I move out.

When I got a further I ran into a couple of C Company men. They were all trying to get together. I think as we moved further along we ran into more men. We were finally getting organized. We started down between the hedgerows and got sniper fire from a large tree out in front. I fired a rifle grenade. After dragging my weapon through the water I didn't think it would fire. Others opened up, we didn't hear anymore from this sniper. We came near

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the town of Colleville and I think there was another little town further called Formigny. I guess we fought small groups of Germans all the way. We didn't get much artillery and mortar for most of the day. Toward evening we got Lieutenant Edmonds, he replaced Lieutenant Scott. He took over the Platoon for the time being.

Snipers caused us to slow down most of the time. It was hard to find them. Firing, you didn't know where it was coming from. German burp guns and machine guns cause a lot of disruption. We didn't run into any tanks. We took a few mortar shells. The hedgerows were like walls, four foot maybe higher. The trees shrubs and grass were good concealment for the enemy. There were paths between them and at one end there was a fence like gate. This is what we had to go through to get to the next hedgerow. In this gate, the Germans were zeroed in with their machine guns and mortars. We had to go through there. We tried to climb over the top of the hedgerows, which was worse yet. We kept moving till we had cleaned out the enemy and kept going further into the hedgerows. That is all it was hedgerow after hedgerow.

By now I think we were all getting tired. I had nothing to eat except the D bar. My special food sandwiches got salt water on them and I had to throw them away. When we reached the road the French offered us cider, cognac, calvados, whatever we would empty our canteens and put the next drink in, with out cleaning it out. I don't know why we didn't get sick. I think it was toward evening that the whole 3rd platoon had gotten together. I wasn't scarred

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as I had been on the beach. McKeown held on to his radio so I didn't have to worry about it.

As night started to come in , I guess we dug in along the hedgerows. Sergeant said dig deep, we may get a tank attack. I think I dug a hole that looked like it was 20 feet deep. We sat around talking, digging the out hole and trying to get everything together, see what happened, who was lucky and who was unlucky. Here I was again nothing to eat except D-bars. I was cold and wet in those impregnated clothes and no blanket. Later at night, it must have been close to midnight. I was picked to go on patrol as I was a first scout. I told the Sergeant what are we going to patrol? there is nothing out there but Germans. We went out but didn't run into anything.

We settled down for the night. I tried to sleep but just thinking that I was alive and well after what the 16th went through on the beach. Somehow I wish I could have kept a record of everything day by day. Being a riflemen it was almost impossible to stop and write things down.

To this day there are 17 of us from C Company who landed at Omaha. Somebody always remembers some little incident that came up as we kept moving across France. I just wish, I hope that I will be alive, God willing till June 1994 I'm planning to go back on Omaha Beach. I was there in 1963 with the 241 1st Division people. It was a solemn occasion for us who had landed on Easy Red on June 6, 1944.

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I also went back in October 1991. The two of us from C Company. We placed a plaque on our Company headquarters building in Lyme Regis, England. We stayed with the English that knew us in 1943 and 1944. I have been invited back for June of 1994 for opening of the museum in Lyme. I guess after I get done I'll find some more things that I would be able to tape, it has been a long time. Its been long drawn out affair and to this day I just don't talk about it, and the only time to talk about it is when we are among ourselves, U.S. G.I.'s. I know I am late with this, but many things have happened in the last 6 years. Thank you for listening to my tape. I am John E. Bistrica. Thank you.

End of tape EM 6/22/93 corrections EM 7/8/93