

A Unique Perspective On D-Day

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was originally published by the Press & Dakotan as part of its 50th anniversary commemoration of D-Day.

BY LUVERN RUSCH

On June 6, 1944, I was a Navy Lt. (J.G.) attached to the H.M.S. Attack in Southampton, England. My brother Elmer Rusch, who was a communications officer in the 101st Airborne Division and my brother-in-law, Ed Schroeder of Emery who was an Army Air Corps officer with the 8th Air Force, were also in England the same time.

I was a part of the 12th Amphibious Force and was in command of three LCM (Landing Craft Motorized) vessels.

Each of them was 30 feet long with a front ramp which lowered to allow tanks or troops to unload directly onto a beach.

The LCM's had a crew of five consisting of a Motor Machinist Mat, a Coxswain, two Seaman and a Gunner who handled the 20mm anti-aircraft gun. The boats were completely open with no mess facilities or sleeping quarters for the crew.

I had left the United States on April 4, 1943, with a convoy of 125 ships which went directly to North Africa.

Throughout the passage we were under constant submarine attacks so the convoy had to constantly zigzag, which slowed our passage. It took us over three weeks to cross the Atlantic.

We were on the *William S. Few*, which was a Kaiser-built Liberty ship. There were four LCMs lashed on the ships' deck and the cargo was bombs and gasoline.

There were no bunks for my boat crews. They had to sleep in an outdoor head, but I shared quarters with the ships' communication officer.

When we got to Africa, we landed at Casablanca and then went up the Mediterranean to Mers el Kebir near Oran and then to Algiers. We were there for five weeks under frequent bombing attacks from German aircrafts flying from Italy and Sicily.

There were about 100 ships in the harbor at all times and around 500 barrage balloons.

We stayed on the *William Few* throughout this time, but our boats were unloaded. We did all of our training and gained small boat experience in Algiers harbor that spring.

Finally, we received orders to proceed with a convoy east up the Mediterranean in order to mislead the Germans into thinking that the actual invasion would come somewhere in the Aegean.

We traveled east for five days, nearly to Cairo, before we reversed course and returned to the location of the actual invasion at Sicily, which took place on July 10.

We landed in Sicily near the town of Licata on the southern coast. We worked for three weeks unloading ships into the open beach there.

Our early loads were tanks which had crews who would then drive them away; but then we began hauling gasoline in drums and crates of rations.

We had to unload those supplies ourselves onto the beaches, move them up above the high water and hope we would be able to get our boats off the beach.

We spent two weeks of backbreaking work unloading on the beaches. During this time one of the other officers, who was also in command of three LCMs, became ill and was sent back to the U.S. His three boats and crews were placed under my command.

By the end of two weeks, all six were disabled except for one which still had an engine running. We used that boat to take the 60 crewmen down the shore to Licata, which was about 35 miles away.

When we got there, I reported to the port director and was told to get to the crews aboard a LST (Landing Ship Tanks) in order to return to North Africa.

We left out LCM tied up to the dock and got all 60 of our crew onto the LST within 10 minutes, just as it was pulling away from the dock. As we were leaving the harbor, the captain of the LST received a command to bring us back; but he was already underway and didn't return.



Luvern Rusch

The LST took us back to Algiers. It was mid-August 1943 when we got back there. In September, we were given reconditioned boats and sent to the landing beaches at Salerno, south of Naples, on another Liberty ship — the *James Marshall*.

This was where Mark Clark's 5th Army had landed on Sept. 9. We arrived there on about Sept. 10 or 11 and again unloaded cargo across the open beaches in order to supply the fighting that was going on there.

We stayed there for about two weeks because the landing was not going very well due to German counterattacks. The commanders were afraid that the Army would be driven back onto the beaches and we would have to evacuate, but that didn't happen.

By Oct. 1, 1943, all of our boats were disabled again. We left them at Salerno and loaded on a LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) which took us back to the port of Bon in North Africa.

In Bon there were 36 boat crew members and 12 officers, most of whom had graduated from Notre Dame Officer Candidate School with me. None of us had received any mail, pay or leave during all of this time. I suggested that we locate our headquarters and let them know where we were; I was selected to do that.

In early October, I hitchhiked to Eisenhower's Allied headquarters in Algiers and located the proper officers to report to. They had our mail and pay and promised to deliver it the next day. Since they did not offer me a ride back, I ended up hitchhiking back again.

About ten days later, when I came back from church on Sunday morning, I had orders to have six officers and 200 men on the dock by 1 p.m.

We were loaded on two sub-chasers (which were small destroyers), but they had no accommodations for us. We had to stay on deck and try to keep out of the wind. They took us back to Mers el Kabir. That approximately 600 mile trip back up the Mediterranean took us two days and two nights.

In Oran, we were loaded on LSTs again and sent through the Straits of Gibraltar and across the Bay of Biscay to Falmouth in Cornwall, England.

During the journey, our convoy was attacked by German rockets fired from flying boats at least four different times. Because of the locations of the attacks, we were certain that they were flying out of Spanish airbases. Spain was supposed to be a neutral country.

These were some of the very first reported rocket attacks. When we got back to England, we were interviewed about the rocket attacks by reporters. I was quoted at length in the *New York Times*.

I was surprised by how many people back in South Dakota got word of where I was at the time because of the article in a *New York* paper.

We arrived in England on Thanksgiving Day 1943. We landed at Falmouth and then moved

to Plymouth, which is also on the south coast of England.

We spent the entire winter of 1943-44 doing training in loading and unloading ships. We also practiced night landings and joint Army-Navy maneuvers which could be used in the invasion areas.

On one occasion that winter I was detailed to go to the resort town of Brigham. I worked as Port Director with a number of Black officers and men who were stationed there.

Many of the other American officers in Plymouth were Southerners who wouldn't accept that assignment.

During this time, I learned that my brother was in England, also preparing for the invasion. He was at Newbury Airbase near London. I was able to call him on the base phone one night when I was the duty officer. In the conversation I learned that his unit had been participating in some of the very same maneuvers that I had been involved in.

Around June 1, we received our orders to leave LCMs in Plymouth and proceed by train to Southampton.

They were assigned to different LCMs and told that this was the "real thing." We had no quarters and no supplies. When we were able, we would pull up alongside one of the Liberty ships and eat with them or sleep if we could.

That whole area of England was just full of troops and there was a lot of confusion. I was told later that there were over two million men and five thousand ships packed into that small area of England waiting for D-Day.

We never received any formal orders or briefings about what we were to do for the invasion.

We marked time for a couple of days. I was told by some of the port directors on the docks that when the invasion started, we were to follow a Liberty ship and help it unload onto the beaches.

About midnight on June 5, the Liberty ships weighed anchor and we followed them out to sea.

It was about 50 miles to Normandy across the open sea and we had never crossed open sea before. We weren't sure that our boats were capable of doing that.

During the night it was extremely dark and we got split up from the other LCMs. By morning, there were just my three boats. At daylight, we were only about halfway across. It was noon before we got right off-shore.

We had seen literally thousands of aircraft and had been strictly warned not to shoot any of them — as all of the planes would be friendly. We also saw the cruisers *Milwaukee* and *Saratoga* which were shelling some targets inland.

There were some artillery fire from German shore batteries, but they were shooting at bigger targets than our boats.

We spent the afternoon of June 6 trying to unload tanks from a Liberty ship onto our LCMs that were bobbing around like corks in the high swells. The tanks weighed 20 or 30 tons. They would get the tanks up from the Liberty ships' hold on a cargo boom and suspend them over the side to lower them into the LCMs. Unfortunately, boats would be going up and down 20 feet or more in the swells; it was just impossible to do.

We found that it was completely different loading tanks in the rough waters of the English Channel than it had been in the Mediterranean.

We also weren't sure what would happen if we did get them loaded because, with a 30-ton tank, the LCMs only had about six inches of freeboard. After four or five hours of unsuccessful efforts, we gave up trying to load large tanks. We took a load of small tanks and weapons carriers into shore.

The thing that was remarkable about the beach was the tremendous amount of work that the Germans had put into obstructing the beaches.

They would have ripped the bottom out of a larger boat, but we were able to maneuver around them. There was very little activity on the beaches when we got there. There were quite a few damaged and destroyed vehicles and boats from the morning landings.

By the time we got that load put ashore it was too dark to take another load in. We spent the night motoring around the Liberty ship to

keep near it. We put up a tarp in the boat to give us some shelter, but it was largely unsuccessful. We had a miserable night.

The second day there was a storm with strong winds and large waves. We could not approach the Liberty ship that we were supposed to unload.

The storm brought the unloading of supplies to a standstill. The seas were too rough to tie up alongside any of the larger ships and also too rough to use our small anchor. We had to motor all day to keep from running into someone.

By evening all three of my boats were out of fuel and there was nothing that we could do but beach them. We took our shelter halves (half of a pup tent) and set them up right below the bluffs on Utah beach. We spent a cold, wet night on the beach with nothing to eat but C-rations. Still, it was better than the night before.

There wasn't much activity on the beach at all during the time that I was there.

The next morning we located five other LCM officers and their crews. They were all stranded on the beach just as we were because their boats had also run out of fuel.

We began looking around trying to find some jobs that we could help with. Early in the morning a Lt. Commander from Headquarters came along the beach looking for anyone with any experience in loading and unloading ships. I told him that I had training and experience in that sort of thing. I was immediately dispatched back to England on LST.

The other officers thought that I was foolish for volunteering for what looked like a hard job. But it turned out that I had comfortable quarters and rations for the next ten months and they had no quarters or regular rations for a long time.

By the second day after D-Day it was apparent that the troops would have to be supplied over the beaches until a reliable port could be captured. In order to do that, they would have to load ships out of English ports 24 hours a day.

When I got back to Portland, Weymouth, I was assigned quarters in a British Officer's Billet that even had room service. However, I began work right away loading ships.

Usually I worked night shifts and my responsibility was to get troops and their equipment on to the right ships for transport to France. Most days we would load a full division with all of their equipment and supplies. Our goal was to get each LST loaded, underway and back for France within two hours of the time they docked.

In mid-July, I learned that my brother Elmer had been killed at Ste. Mere Eglise on D-Day. His glider had been one of those that were immediately destroyed by heavy German fire as they landed.

I was able to catch a ride to Normandy on one of the LSTs that we loaded and located his grave there. I was also able to get a leave to Newbury and talk to the burial officer who recovered his body.

By the fall of 1944, the work had decreased because many of the supplies and equipment were going directly into ports in Europe, rather than coming through England.

I was allowed a number of leaves and I saw some of England, traveled to Scotland and went to London twice.

I also went to an Army hospital and visited George Schroeder, another brother-in-law, who had been badly injured leading an infantry platoon in Germany.

American servicemen were supposed to have an 18 month tour of duty. But when my 18 months came up in October of 1944, my request to return to the United States was turned down. I was determined to be "essential personnel."

I ended up staying in England at this same job until April 4, 1945, the day Franklin Roosevelt died. That day I shipped out for home on a fast, former German transport that had been seized in South Africa. There were 600 Canadian troops headed home on the ship and we made it across the Atlantic in only five days.

I later learned that Yankton dentist Dr. Morman was the ship's dentist on that voyage.



L. Straka



L. Cwach



A. Mazourek



A. Straka



B. Mazourek



J. Straka



M. Mazourek



E. Cap



F. Mazourek



R. Cap

A Family Proudly Serves America In The Military

Submitted by Leona Cwach

LUVERN ERNEST CWACH was born December 27, 1925, on a family farm in Yankton County. Luvern graduated in 1943 from Lesterville High School. He enlisted in the Navy in August 1943.

Luvern was a diesel mechanic in England and was a truck driver and jeep driver in France. He also worked as a minesweeper in Japan. He served his country from August 1943 until April 1946.

He was a farmer and a carpenter all of his life. One of his favorite stories to share was about his coming home from the war. He got to ride on the ship *Queen Mary*, in a bunk in the drained swimming pool.

Luvern died Jan. 6, 2008, at the age of 82.

MARVIN LINDSTROM was in the Army during World War II. He was a Captain at the time of his discharge.

He was born in Vermillion. He was a carpenter and lived west of Yankton after his discharge.

Marvin died in April 1963.

JOSEPH J. STRAKA JR. was born in Janousek. He enlisted in the Navy in 1941. He was the ship Store Keeper on the *U.S.S. Boise*.

When the ship was engaged in battle on Oct. 12, 1942, Joseph was one of the many South Dakotans who lost their lives. Joseph was buried in the South Pacific on a small island called New Caledonia. Later his body was moved and reburied in Hawaii.

Joseph's memory is immortalized on a bronze plaque in the state

capital of Boise, Idaho.

ALVIN STRAKA, born in Janousek, joined the Navy during World War II. He was an electrician. During the Invasion of Okinawa 1942-1945, he was on the Patrol Craft Escort.

LUVERNE STRAKA was born in Janousek. He served in the Navy, 1942-1945, during World War II in Yeoman in the *USS ROI* Aircraft Carrier in the Logistic Support Group, eighty miles off the coast of Japan. He was there when Japan surrendered.

Joseph Jr., Alvin and Luverne were all sons of Joseph and Katie Straka.

ERNE CAP and RAYMOND CAP — sons of Frank and Hattie Cap — were born in Yankton. Both men joined the Navy during World

War II and served from 1943 to 1945. Raymond was a Radar Operator on a LST (Landing Ship Tank). Ernest was a Radio Operator with the Mobile Land Based, Communication Unit. His unit was involved in two invasions.

BENJAMIN, MARTIN JR., ADOLPH and FRANK MAZOUREK — all sons of Martin Sr. and Antonia (Tonie) Mazourek and born in Dante — served our country during war time.

Benjamin served from 1945-1946 with a Landing Craft Infantry as an Engine Mechanic. He was involved with five invasions.

Martin Jr. served in the Navy from 1945-1946 on the *USS Wisconsin* Battleship as a Typist in the Personnel Office. He delivered Plans to the Executive Officer. He

was in Japan at the time of their surrender.

Adolph joined the Army in 1950-1952 during the Korean War. He was born March 7, 1928 on the family farm in Dante. He moved to Neillsville, Wisconsin in 1958 where he became a dairy farmer. He died Nov. 20, 2000, at the age of 72.

Frank graduated from Yankton High School and joined the Air Force, where he served from 1956 to 1960. He returned to Yankton and worked as a telephone technician. He was born on March 14, 1938 and died April 29, 2000, at the age of 62.

All of these above named brave men who willingly served our country were related.

They are our family, friends and neighbors; everyday citizens, yet so much more. They are the brave men and women who have been on the front lines in defense of our freedom. We take this opportunity to say thank you to all who have served for our Armed Forces.

We would especially like to thank the veterans of the Hunhoff and Rokusek families who have served in the military.

Representative Jean Hunhoff & Family

