

The Franklin News-Post

"Serving the Land Between the Lakes Philpott and Smith Mountain"

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Re: Glenwood Divers, Veteran of World War II

Divers recalls D-Day, other war experiences



Staff Photo by Morris Stephenson: Glenwood Divers, 92, still vividly recalls the June 6, 1944, Allied Forces D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. Divers recently talked about the invasion in which an estimated 2,499 U.S. soldiers died out of the 34,250 who stormed the beach that day.

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Wednesday, November 11, 2009

By MORRIS STEPHENSON - Staff Writer

Glenwood Divers' mind hasn't been dulled by the 65 years since the Allied Forces' invasion of Omaha Beach in Normandy on June 6, 1944, better known as D-Day.

Divers was one of an estimated 34,250 United States soldiers who stormed Omaha Beach. Of that total, 2,499 went into the record books as killed in action. In addition, there were 3,184 wounded and another 1,928 missing. Only 26 were captured, according to research records.

"I was 23 when I was drafted on April 12, 1941. It was just months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor to start World War II," he recalls.

Like many others, Divers received basic training at Fort Meade, Md. His driving experience and ability to repair vehicles and farm equipment landed him with an infantry division after additional training.

Divers, who was assigned to the 111th Field Artillery Battalion of the famed 29th Infantry Division, remembers that on D-Day he was aboard a landing craft.

Along with other soldiers in his unit, the craft carried a large load of ammunition, a half track with a blade attached plus the weapons carrier he drove.

He said the sea was especially rough that day and recalls holding his hand over the landing craft's "carburetor hole" to keep the water splashing in from causing the motor to stall.

While still in deep water, Divers said he saw an 88 mm shell hit right in the center of a landing craft on the beach apparently killing all on board

"We were going into the beach when a landing craft on the beach was hit. It exploded, sending a huge cloud of black smoke into the air," Divers said.

The explosion blocked that area of the beach and for a while kept craft in the channel from landing, he recalled.

"After that, we were going back and forth in the channel waiting for the destroyed carrier to be cleared from the beach," he added.

Divers said the operator of his landing craft started toward the beach once it had been reopened.

"He (landing craft operator) stopped well short of the beach and said the water was shallow enough to unload the half track with the blade," he said. "Well, the water wasn't shallow enough. It was still deep. When the half track operator drove it off the landing craft, it sunk.

"We continued toward the beach until the water was shallow enough for me to drive the weapons carrier off the landing craft. After it got into the water, I still had about a half mile to go before I got to the actual beach area."

After Divers drove his truck across the beach, he said he parked it in one place the first night.

"It was dark and we had to stay put because all the roads were mined and they hadn't been cleared yet," he said. "The next morning at daybreak, all you could see was the beach lined with the dead and wounded."

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A couple of day's later, Divers recalls he was sitting in the driver's seat of his truck talking to an incoming American soldier.

"I was looking back over my shoulder talking to him when I heard a bullet go by. It hit him right in the chest. He fell to the ground and died right there," he said.

As days passed, Divers said he and his company continued to move deeper into the countryside.

He made it through the entire war without being "officially" wounded although there was one day he suffered an injury he still can't explain.

He had seen a wounded soldier in a ditch line who had been treated by the medics but left where he was treated.

"I was going to pick up the soldier and take him to the field hospital when all of a sudden, my finger tip started tingling. I looked and saw I was bleeding," Diver said, adding that he never heard a bullet but said the "nip on my finger" had to have come from a bullet or a piece of shrapnel.

"When I got the wounded soldier to a field hospital, I went in with him and had them put a bandage on my finger. They wanted to fill out a report on the injury but I told them no, I didn't consider that an injury."

If the hospital had reported it, Divers would have received a Purple Heart.

He also remembers one day entering a town containing a church with a steeple.

"I was told there was a German soldier in the top of the steeple giving information about our location to his guns and tanks," he said. "They ended up shooting off the steeple. Then they shelled the church until it was down to the ground."

On another occasion, he was pulling an anti-tank gun with his truck and also serving as a spotter when they discovered a German tank. Divers said they opened fire and hit the tank several times.

"But we couldn't do any damage except knock off one of its tracks. They eventually did away with that size gun," he added with a smile.

His outfit worked their way toward Germany and eventually ended up at the bunker where Adolph Hitler and his wife Eva died and their bodies burned on April 30, 1945.

"We went into the building where they told us Hitler had killed himself and his wife. They even showed us fresh grave sites they said were theirs" (the couple's)," Divers said.

The Crossroads native also was around when another important part of history was being made a month later.

Divers discovered shortly after arriving in France that having a driver's license was important in more ways than one.

As a result, Divers became the driver of a colonel's jeep late in the war. Although he has forgotten the colonel's full name over the years he's sure the last name was DeCamp.

Records show there were four surrender papers signed May 7, 1945, the official day of the surrender.

One of the signings was in Berlin. Divers remembers he took this particular high-ranking officer to a building in Berlin where the colonel was among the Americans signing the surrender papers.

"I drove him to the building and then stood around until the colonel had finished. Then I took him back traveling the Berlin section of the Autobahn. At one point, we looked up ahead and there was a bunch of Russian soldiers blocking the road," he said.

"He (the colonel) didn't want to get mixed up with the Russians since we didn't speak their language. So he ordered me to take a short cut through the woods. I took him on quite a bouncing trip before we got back on the Autobahn again," Divers said, flashing his big smile.

"After the war ended, they made all of us with a driver's license go into Germany and help return the French men, women, young children and babies to their homes. The Germans had forced the French people to go with them as they retreated," he explained.

Divers was driving one of the six-by-six (axle) trucks. He described the French people as "some having hardly anything to wear while others were well dressed".

His funny war story was of the day he was waiting to load French residents. He saw a beautiful, well-dressed young woman heading toward his truck.

"You can put that one in the front seat with me," he told the soldier in charge. "And he did. He put her

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right up there beside of me," Divers said with a hardy laugh.

But things didn't work out like Divers had wanted or planned.

"At the last minute, the soldier came up to the truck and got the pretty woman out. Then he replaced her with an ugly woman with a newborn baby," he said with another hardy laugh.

For the remainder of his time, Divers continued to make the all-day trips returning French civilians to their homes. "It'd take us a day to drive there from our base. We'd spend the night and start the trip back the next morning."

Divers finally got orders to be shipped back to England. The boat trip home took about a month.

He arrived in the United States on Sept. 14, 1945 and was honorably discharged Oct. 3, 1945.

According to his discharge papers, Divers officially served in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. He also received four battle stars for his participation in campaigns that were part of the European Theatre of Operations.

When Divers returned to Franklin County, he and Pauline Smith ("We've known each other all our lives") were married June, 1949, on her 21st birthday.

Divers is the son of the late John Tommy Divers and Claudia Jones Divers. He went to the Crossroads School for seven years and then dropped out to help his parents farm and raise tobacco.

"I was 13 years old at the time," he pointed out.

After his discharge, he returned to the farm for a while before going to work at DuPont in Martinsville. It was a job he held for 30 years before retiring in 1977.

His wife also worked at DuPont for a period of time. Then she went to work at the Franklin County Continuing Education Center before moving to Rocky Mount Elementary School and Benjamin Franklin Middle School. She retired from BFMS in 1993.

The couple had two children, the late Melissa Divers- Lance and Mark Allen Divers of Wirtz. The couple has two grandchildren, Megan and Mallory Divers.

In June 1990, Divers and his late daughter made a week-long trip back to visit Omaha Beach and some of the towns he saw as a soldier after leaving the invasion site.

He said it was truly a touching experience seeing the area as a peaceful site.

The visit also gave him the opportunity to see all of the memorial monuments that have been erected since he last saw the area in 1944.

Divers said he will never forget his first trip or his return trip to Omaha Beach, which was more than 45 years later.

Veterans Day and Memorial Day will always have a special meaning to him, he said.

