

Landing in Europe

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

PROVIDED BY WORLD WAR II THROUGH THE EYES OF CAPE FEAR

As you read...

D-DAY

In 1944, the Allies had amassed enough men and equipment to invade France and liberate Western Europe from Nazi occupation. Hitler's army was already spread thin over two fronts, one in Italy and the other in Russia. German troops had sustained heavy losses in Russia during the winter of 1943 and 1944. It was the perfect time to launch an offensive attack and push across Europe from Paris to Berlin. The D-Day landings in Normandy, France, took place on June 6, 1944.

Clay Christensen and Dan Cameron served in different divisions in the U.S. Army, but both men landed on the beaches of France shortly after D-Day. In these interviews, Cameron and Christensen describe what it was like to cross from America to England and then to cross the English Channel to land in France.

READING ORAL HISTORIES

Oral history interviews are complicated sources. The person who was interviewed was remembering events that happened years earlier. The interviewer and interviewee made assumptions about each other, which affected the questions that were asked and the answers that were given. Interviews are not just memories; they are conversations shaped by beliefs and attitudes of the time period in which the interview was recorded.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What were some of the obstacles faced by American troops as they crossed over from England to France?
2. What did Cameron and Christensen see when they landed on the beaches of Normandy?
3. How did the troops get their equipment from the ships to the beaches?
4. After landing on the beaches, how far did Christensen's division move before they met the Germans? How far did Cameron's division move before they were engaged in battle?
5. When Christensen's division arrived on the front lines, he says they were "greeted" by the Germans. What does he mean? What did the Germans say to the 99th Division?

Clayton Christensen

Original interview from World War II Through the Eyes of Cape Fear¹

Interviewer:

Do you remember the crossing? (From the U.S. To Europe)

Christensen:

I do, I remember in the Gulf Stream two to three days out from the United States, it was hot after the Gulf Stream, we stripped down to just skivvies for whatever you were doing. Not any work cause they had permanent people on the ship for the mess hall and I didn't get seasick myself, so I had the luxury and with a little bit of rank, I managed to stay up on the deck or hanging in the doorway most of the way over.

Interviewer:

How long did crossing take?

Christensen:

Took about 10 days and over near France we were supposed to land in Sherbourg, France, but we got word that the harbor was so full of landing craft that had been sunk, had to go backtrack and drop anchor under the White Cliffs of Dover and you can see those cliffs for many miles away. So we dropped anchor there until about 4:00 in the afternoon and then we pulled up anchor and went into the port of Southampton in England and then we were there for several weeks, about 50 miles north of Southampton in several quonset huts².

Interviewer:

This was after D-Day at this time?

Christensen:

That was after D-Day and then after two weeks of running around loose in England, we boarded ships, various ships and I crossed with my company commander. A small craft, I guess is land craft infantry, a small ship about 30-40 feet long would hold two vehicles and 15-20 men and it had a drop front on it and going across the channel³ at night. Oh I had been in the hospital, caught double pneumonia because we went on a forced march one morning.

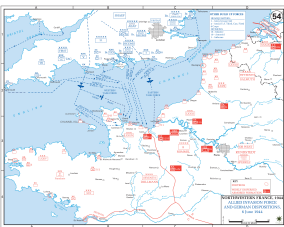


Figure 1. Map shows the routes used to cross the English Channel and landing points in Normandy.

Interviewer:

In England?

Christensen:

In England and about 9:00, the sun came out and then it clouded over and began to rain and on the way back in, it was snowing. It was sort of weird, but typical English weather.

Interviewer:

You caught a bad cold?

Christensen:

Caught a bad cold that turned into pneumonia and I went to the hospital. My company commander came down to the hospital a couple days later and told me it was payday and he brought all my gear and told me they were getting ready to go across the channel the next day and I told him, don't leave me. If he'd help me get dressed, I'd go with him.

Interviewer:

Who was your company commander?

Christensen:

His name was Captain A.J. Harverstick, a most intelligent person, just down to earth, with tons of common sense. During the war, he saved my life several times and I managed to save his several times. He knew everything the Germans were going to do to us before they attempted to do it.

Interviewer:

Had you served with him stateside or you just...

Christensen:

He was our company commander after I went back to Texas to radio school in Fort Monmouth, stayed with him all the way through the war.

Interviewer:

Now this craft took you across the channel and you ended up where?

Christensen:

It did and it seems that we, our little craft and several others landed at either Utah Beach or Cold Beach⁴, it was sort of deserted at the time. Going across, it was a moonlit night with scattered clouds and it made the light from the moon shimmer on the waters and then it would cloud over and then it would come out again and I'm looking off to my left and I see, boy that sure is bright water out there shimmering, it turned out it was a torpedo, German submarine had already zeroed in on us or something that was behind us and I screamed at the Navy man who was running the ship. I told him to turn hard left and let's head into that oncoming torpedo and by that time, I could tell that there were two torpedoes and one was probably 20' behind and 6-8' off to the left and the first torpedo missed us no more than that. Pretty scary.

Interviewer:

Did you see it go by?

Christensen:

I watched both of them go by.

Interviewer:

At night in the dark?

Christensen:

At night in that moonlit night. So we went on over to France.

Interviewer:

When you say this craft that you were in, which is like a landing craft.

Christensen:

A small landing craft.

Interviewer:

About 30 men.

Christensen:

Well I don't believe we had more than a dozen men with us but it held two vehicles and a jeep and a weapons carrier and I was driving the weapons carrier.

Interviewer:

Where any other men going over at the same time in other crafts?

Christensen:

Yeah, our whole company was on various crafts and all of us went over as a small group and that group was a part of 30 or 40 or 50 vehicles out there. You could see different crafts and ships scattered all over the ocean that night.

Interviewer:

And you landed at the beaches of Normandy?

Christensen:

Dropped anchor on the beach and my captain says, "Sergeant, don't you lose my damn vehicle in the water here" so when I hit the water, I headed in low range in second gear and wide open.

Interviewer:

A jeep?

Christensen:

I had the weapons carrier.

Interviewer:

Who rode in it, who was supposed to ride in it?

Christensen:

I was in it by myself. All the men who were in the boat with us, they all waded through the waters.

Interviewer:

This was at night, in the dead of the night?

Christensen:

Well we crossed the channel, took us all night long to cross. We were actually landing at daybreak.

Interviewer:

Were you able to see any signs of the D-Day invasion?

Christensen:

Not really because the beaches you know were swept clean with the tides. Then as soon as I hit the beach, my captain motioned for me to follow him and we immediately started moving on out of there and I saw the physical evidence of the battles being fought as we went north. We went on up to a little town called Albell, Belgium.

Interviewer:

You traveled all the way from the French coast to Belgium in one day after you landed?

Christensen:

We stopped somewhere in bivouac the first night, but I don't remember where it was. It was close to this little place called Albell, Belgium.

Interviewer:

No sign of the enemy at this time?

Christensen:

No, they were further off shore. Albell, Belgium was probably 15 miles from the German border or from the German Siegfried line⁵. Albell was maybe 10 miles from the German border.

Interviewer:

What happened after you got there?

Christensen:

Well we went into combat mode and we just dug in there. The Germans greeted us.

Interviewer:

This was at the front lines then?

Christensen:

This was at the front lines.

Interviewer:

Did you relieve any other unit or did you just arrive...

Christensen:

We did, but I don't really know who we relieved, but the Germans had big loudspeakers up there and they welcomed the 99th division. We were sort of a sleeping incognito outfit to the Germans supposedly, but they knew all about us. On the loudspeakers, they gave us our complete history from the day that the unit was activated until we got to the German lines and they quit speaking to us over the loudspeakers and for the next few weeks, if they would fire a rifle shot or an artillery shell, we would answer in kind and if we fired one artillery piece or weapon, they would answer back in kind.

Dan Cameron

*Original interview from World War II Through the Eyes of Cape Fear*⁶

Interviewer:

Had you been abroad before the Army???

Cameron:

No. No I had not. I stayed in England about 8 months. Of course they corralled us up before D-Day started and we were confined to an area there for about two weeks.??

Interviewer:

They didn't want any leaks, right???

Cameron:

We knew what was coming, but we didn't know when and then we got the orders, we headed down to the port. In fact, we left our base camp on D-Day in England, headed to the port, it was D + 3 before we actually got to Omaha Beach??⁷.

Interviewer:

And what was it like at that point? I mean that was a brutal battle, but when you got there, had it started to at least...??

Cameron:

Oh when we got there, the carnage was pretty much over with. The troops had gotten off of the beach and they were 4 or 5 miles inland.

Interviewer:

Not very far though.

Cameron:

Not very far, but bodies piled up on the sand, machinery, tanks and boats just everywhere you looked.

Interviewer:

And was the Luftwaffe at that point fairly...??

Cameron:

It was not. They made a presence on D-Day, but when we got there, the activities on the beach had diminished considerably. Did have attacks, but not big attacks, not constant air attacks, but we were always, they were always shooting at us with those 88's.??

Interviewer:

Their field artillery.?

Cameron:

We went into Omaha and Utah Beaches.??

Interviewer:

And at that point without the enemy, how did you land then, still in that same kind of boat or were you coming in at a different kind...??



Figure 2. LSTs being loaded in preparation for the Normandy invasions, June 1944.

Cameron:

Well that's an interesting question. We had trained all spring loading our guns and trucks, had a lot of trucks in our unit. We loaded them into the LST's⁸ which were going right to the beach. When we went down to ship out in Southport, they loaded us into a liberty ship so instead of being in an LST, they put all our guns and trucks and everything down in the hold of a liberty ship and we were tremendously surprised because we hadn't trained on it or anything like that. We went over across the channel, got off at Omaha Beach and then the trick was, they had a barge arrangement called, a great big flat barge, rhino ferry and so you'd have to get a rhino ferry to come along side the ship and then you had to lift all of our guns and trucks and put them down on the ferry and the ferry went to shore.??

Interviewer:

Interesting. And how did you get ashore as an individual???

Cameron:

That way.??

Interviewer:

You went over on that ferry too.??

Cameron:

And one of the little interesting highlights is the people on that ship, they were Merchant Marines⁹, they weren't Navy and when we got off the shore of Normandy¹⁰, they were not in any hurry to get us unloaded because they were getting triple time pay being in the combat zone.

Interviewer:

Oh my God.??

Cameron:

And so they would not let their crew unload our equipment and so we actually lost about a day and a half and finally I was the ranking officer on the ship and we got the men out of our unit, found one that you always had someone that could do everything and so we found our men that could operate their rigs and we loaded our own stuff. And you might say that I threatened to shoot the captain of the boat I was so upset. (Laughter) In retrospect, it might have been the best thing that ever happened because I was a day and a half late getting to shore.

Interviewer:

That's right, it saved you (laughter).

Cameron:

But I was really upset.

Interviewer:

And somebody up the line was probably upset too.??

Cameron:

Yes, they were looking for us. Other units had about the same experience.??

Interviewer:

Is that right? Now is this British or American Merchant Marine???

Cameron:

They were Americans.??

Interviewer:

Oh my goodness, interesting. So did they hustle you right off the beach because it was pretty loaded. I mean did you move in very quickly.

Cameron:

All the guns and trucks were covered with grease because we could literally run our trucks in order to get down under the water and we had a stack up and you had what they called cosmoline¹¹, all the spark plugs and all the motors and everything. So when we got to shore, it took a certain amount of time just to clean that mess off before you could move. You've seen pictures of all these on D-Day, well that's exactly where we were, right under those cliffs.

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Notes

1. See http://capefearww2.uncwil.edu/voices/clayton_christensen038.html.
2. A quonset hut is a prefabricated building (meaning it comes already assembled, or in parts that are easily fitted together), made from lightweight steel. It is usually shaped in a semi-circle or a half-cylinder.
3. The English Channel divides Britain from France.
4. Allied troops landed at five different beaches along the coast of Normandy, a province of France. Utah Beach was the code name for the “right flank” or the furthest point west where Allied troops landed. It was nicknamed Cold Beach by the men who landed on the shore because of the cold temperature of the water.
5. The Siegfried Line refers to the German military defense system built in the 1930s along the border with France.
6. See <http://capefearww2.uncwil.edu/voices/cameron099.html>.
7. Omaha Beach was a code name for one of the five points along the coast of France where Allied troops landed on D-Day. It was the bloodiest and most deadly of all the battles fought on D-Day, with 2200 American casualties. Despite the horrific loss of life, two days after the initial attack, American troops prevailed.
8. LST stands for Landing Ship Tank. It was a large ship built for transporting equipment and men. It was designed so that men and equipment could easily unload directly on a shore or beach, without docks or any additional unloading equipment.
9. Merchant Marines were private contractors hired by the government to assist in the transportation of goods, men, and equipment.
10. Normandy is a province in the north of France. It borders the English Channel, which is a narrow waterway that divides Britain from France.
11. Cosmoline is a type of grease used to protect machines, electrical equipment, and guns from water damage. It can be very difficult to remove.

About the author

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