

Frank and Clarence

By K. F. Stubert

Frank pressed his back tightly against the hard side of the landing craft and tried to block out the terror that surely lay ahead. His ears were still ringing from the explosions of the surrounding ships' big guns that earlier pounded the German defense. The shelling was to knock out four fortified positions, *Widerstandnest 62, 62, 64 and 65*, that defended the Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach, Normandy. Additionally, Sherman tanks were already on the beach, ahead of the first wave. "The landings will be a cinch," they were told but Frank's gut told him differently.

As the LCVP pulled away, Frank studied the 35 other soldiers packed in around him. Most were young men, boys actually, still in their teens or early twenties; intermixed were a few older sergeants and officers. "I didn't have to be here," he questioned himself. "Most of these guys didn't have a choice; they were drafted but I volunteered. I felt it was my duty. Why did I do that?" Even though he was in his mid-thirties, the Army was eager to have him. His age didn't make him courageous. It was just the opposite, he understood too much of the terrors that lay ahead. Frank was petrified; his hands were shaking badly as he prayed. "Lord, give me strength to face what lies ahead and protect me from all evil."

The Higgins boat rocked violently in the heavy seas. Occasionally the surf broke over the gunwales soaking the soldiers. The man next to Frank puked splattering his boots. As the cacophony of gunfire increased early bravado displayed by a few of the men disappeared. Most, if not all the men, were shaking from the cold sea, pent-up energy, and fear.

“Remember your training,” came a barely audible shout. All Frank could remember was to run, get off the beach... fast. The continuous gunfire grew louder and closer; smoke obscured his vision and plumes of water erupted all around the wooden boat.

The front ramp splashed in the water. The first two men were shot immediately. Frank was jostled and pushed forward as the men scrambled to get off and away from the vulnerable boat that was now a prime target. The man beside Frank was hit; he fell against Frank knocking him off the ramp and into the sea. Frank struggled to gain his breath and footing weighed down by his soaked packs, helmet, ammunition, and rifle. He sunk deep into the sand as he pushed toward shore then fell to his knees and caught his first frightening glimpse of Omaha Beach.

Most of the DD Sherman tanks that were to clear the paths from the Easy Red sector of the beach had sunk in the surf. The few remaining tanks that made it ashore were destroyed by the powerful German guns from the untouched *Widerstandnest*. Eighty minutes earlier, the first troops had hit the beach. Their bodies and carnage were strung as far as he could see including bits and pieces of the rubber rafts that carried the explosives and engineers that were to clear the paths from the beach. Now, at H+80, Frank's 16th Regiment, 29th Division had landed. German machine guns, mortars, and rifle fire still raked the beach. Frank threw himself prone and tried to bury himself in the sand as the chaos continued.

An officer stood up waving the troops forward and yelling for them to move. Almost instantly, his body shook as machine gun fire riddled him. Survival, Frank knew, meant moving off the vulnerable beach through one of the draws in the bluffs. He screamed, jumped up, and hurled forward before he stumbled and fell. Just then a mortar exploded just in front of him. If he hadn't fallen, it would have been a direct hit!

Fighting for his breath and life he crawled under the back of a disabled Sherman tank. He was breathing heavily and shaking badly. He knew he couldn't stay there long, as his terror-ridden red eyes scanned for a way out. There was none; the hail of gunfire was incessant.

Out of the chaos, a soldier hopelessly stumbled forward. His helmet was gone as was his rifle. Blood streamed down his dirty, sandy face. "I can't see. I can't see. Help me," he pleaded.

"Get down. Get down, Man," yelled Frank at the top of his lungs.

"I can't see. Where am I?"

Frank reached up, grabbed the man's belt, and pulled him down into the sand. "Stay down!" he yelled as he partially rolled over him to hold him down. "It's OK; stay down. I'll get you out of here. It's OK, soldier; it's OK." Frank tried to calm him down, "What's your name?"

"Clarence. It's Clarence."

"Mine's Frank. We'll get out of here." Frank's demeanor changed. Suddenly he wasn't scared. He had a new purpose and a mission; he was determined to get them both out alive. "Where you from, Clarence?"

"Pittsburgh," Clarence too became calmer.

"No shit? I'm from Pittsburgh too." He continued without waiting for a reply. "Now here's what will do. Hold out your hand." He took hold of the trembling, crusty, bloody hand and placed it on the strap of his backpack. "Now you hold onto this. Don't let go. Don't let go for anything. Got that?" Clarence nodded. "OK. Good. Now when I say go, we get up and run. Can you do that, Clarence... run with me?"

A mortar shell struck nearby. Frank didn't wait for an answer. "Go." The two ran awkwardly forward before staggering into a small depression exhausted and out of breath. Shells continued to rake the area. "Where in Pittsburgh?"

"Huh."

"Where in Pittsburgh you from?"

Clarence shook his head trying to clear his thoughts. "Ah, North Hills."

"Spring Garden. You ready to run?" Clarence nodded. "Go," he screamed and leaped up pulling Clarence with him. Seconds later a mortar hit nearby. Frank screamed in pain and fell pulling Clarence down with him. "I'm hit... in my leg. Geez, it hurts. It's burning! I can't move it."

Clarence was sprawled out but crawled toward the voice and commanded. "You got to. Get to me. Get to me, Frank."

Frank dug his hands into the soft sand and pulled hard, pushing with his one good leg. "Here, Clarence. Here"

Clarence's hand groped and fumbled toward the groans until he felt Frank's fingers. He grappled forward until he had his forearm in hand and dragged Frank next to him. The two lay together physically spent as the mayhem continued around them. Quickly, it became Clarence's turn to take charge.

"I can carry you. You can see. We can do this. We can make it. Get up to my shoulders."

Frank writhed in pain until he laid across Clarence's shoulders to attempt a fireman's carry. He was smaller than Frank, but with Herculean effort, Clarence worked up to his knees, grunted,

thrust up, and ran straight ahead as Frank tried to direct him. They only went a few feet before Clarence tripped over the body of a soldier spilling Frank ahead of him.

Frank scrambled back to his bewildered partner. "It's OK, Clarence. You're right, we can do this. We got to. We can make it but not that way. Let me get on your back, piggyback. I can see better and guide us."

Both men worked with grim determination ignoring the gunfire that surrounded them. With Frank's arms around his neck, Clarence fought to his feet and lumbered forward with Frank directing his shoulders and yelling in his ear. Clarence lurched through the sand laboring with each step before falling hard on his left side. Frank rolled in pain and the two men lay apart for what seemed an eternity. Frank finally regained his senses and looked around.

"Clarence, Clarence," he insisted. "The gunfire. Listen. We made it! We made it."

Clarence sat up disoriented. Most of the noise seemed to be behind him but he wasn't sure where he was or what direction he faced. "Where are we?"

"We made it!" Frank was exuberant. "We're off the beach, Clarence. We did it. We're in the draw. We're off the beach! Oh my, God, Clarence, we are off that beach!" Tears rolled down his face and he forgot about the pain.

"Hey you two," a harsh cry echoed from the path. "Get on your feet and move on. The Krauts are still shottin' at us. There's still a war on."

Frank looked up at the crusty Sergeant, "Can't, Sarge. I'm hit in the leg and can't walk. My Buddy, there," he threw his thumb toward Clarence, "can't see. Somehow we helped each other."

The Sergeant's eyes sharpened as he examined the two prone men. Frank's pant leg was ripped apart exposing raw, ugly, red flesh. Clarence's face was coated with sweat, blood, and sand. He quickly turned around and barked an order, "You, Davis, get four men and take these guys to the aid station."

It was late afternoon before Clarence was guided into the field tent. Frank, half carried and half limping hopped to a different part of the tent where a medic treated him; "You'll be OK, soldier. Looks like the shrapnel missed the bone and the arteries. We'll need to get you back to a hospital to dig it out but you'll be OK."

"What about Clarence?"

"That the guy came in with you? Blind guy?" Frank nodded. "Doc's lookin' at him. Probably bandage him up and send him home. Can't do much here but make him comfortable. That's all I can tell you. Pretty lucky for both of you, getting off the beach wounded and all. Real hell-hole. Lots of guys didn't make it."

"I wouldn't have made it without him," Frank solemnly stated.

The medic gave a sympathetic smile, "Bet he'd say the same thing. Rest easy soldier."

Epilogue

While the events in this story on Omaha Beach in Normandy are fictional, it's based on two very real persons, both veterans of WWII. Frank was my uncle and Godfather. He did enter the Army later in life, served as a cook, landed at Normandy, and was wounded in the war. After his tour of duty, he returned to Pittsburgh where he led a long, normal life. At his funeral, I was presented with the flag that draped his casket. It is now proudly on display in my office.

Clarence was my first cousin. He was wounded and blinded at the Battle of the Bulge. He was sent to an Army rehab hospital in Pennsylvania where he received a commission to Lieutenant and met his nurse and future wife, Phyllis. They moved to California where Clarence studied and became a noted psychiatrist.

These were two ordinary men who performed extraordinary service; they typified thousands of other men, all of whom are deserving of the title, "The Greatest Generation."