

In recognition of the 75th Anniversary of the June 6, 1944 invasion of Normandy, France, by the 160,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, the Macungie Historical Society is proud to present this personal account of a Macungie D-Day veteran. The following account is transcribed from a personal interview published twenty years ago by David Venditta of *The Morning Call*, and a second interview published by the Macungie Historical Society in 2004.

œ D-Day Remembered – June 6, 1944 œ

For twenty-one months in Bristol, England, our company was under nightly German air raids. Our outfit unloaded ships' stores supplies in warehouses and prepared shipments to Army units in England. To relieve the stress, we had been sent to stay in private homes in small Welsh towns. At midnight, around June 3rd, we were alerted to ship out. We drove through towns – All the windows were blackened and there wasn't a soul on the streets. Our company moved into a restricted area in Southampton. We were told we would be in the first wave of the invasion.

On June 4, we loaded onto coasters. Our company was loaded on one; about 175 men and tons of ammunition. Three other boats from our company had been loaded with other supplies; and more than 5,000 ships were loaded with troops (etc.). Attached to each ship was a barrage balloon to prevent German planes from air strikes. Our unit was part of the 1st Army, 5th Engineer Special Brigade under Maj. Gen. Omar Bradley.

On June 5, we embarked for Omaha Beach, reaching the coast on the 6th of June. It was early morning, overcast, and the sea was awful rough and choppy. I remember seeing the mine sweepers trying to clear the area of mines. We anchored off the coast and stayed in position. Men were coming off the landing craft ahead of us. We were met by fierce enemy artillery fire. On shore facing us were more enemy troops than we had in our assault waves. The advantages were all theirs, disadvantages all ours. I saw a lot of wreckage and bodies on the beach. It was a pitiful sight. There was a lot of fear. I was in a daze, like in a trance, like someone had given me dope. I couldn't believe that this was happening.

The Germans were dug into positions they had been working on for months. Still, they were not yet all complete. On one bluff, a couple of hundred yards back from the beach, were great concrete gun emplacements built right into the hilltops. They opened to the sides instead of the front, thus making it very hard for Naval fire from the sea to reach them. They could shoot parallel with the beach and cover every foot of it for miles with artillery fire.

Our outfit started at approximately H+3 hours on June 6. We were met by fierce, concentrated enemy artillery, mortar and small arms fire from dug-in positions just over the ridge line of the hills commanding the beach. Guns from the battleships behind us bombarded overhead. You could hear the shells – whissh, whissh, whissh – going through the air, one after the other. The sky was full of planes and gliders going inland with paratroopers. There was noise and hollering on our ship. Someone had gotten hit, I guess. Stay down low, stay low, was all I could think.

The Germans had hidden machine gun nests on the forward slopes, with crossfire taking every inch of the beach. These nests connected with networks of trenches so that German gunners could move about without exposing themselves. Throughout the length of the beach, running zigzag a couple of hundred yards back from the shoreline, was an immense V-shaped ditch 15 feet deep. The Germans had masses of those great six-pronged "spiders" made of railroad iron, and standing shoulder high in places, just beneath the surface of the water for our landing crafts to run into. They also had huge logs buried in the sand pointing upward and outward, their tops just below the water, and attached to these logs were mines.

A lot of poor boys, they came in on landing craft and hit the beach, and there wasn't a beach. There was a deep hole in front of them, and a lot of them drowned. From our coaster, I saw parts of bodies floating by. I knew I was going to go on in to the beach, and wondered if I was going to be one of those floating by. But the good Lord was with a lot of people, and I was one of the lucky ones.

We stayed in place quite a while, till everything quieted down. After three hours, we saw our boys had made it off the beach and over the hill, and that's when we came in. There was a pitiful litter of wreckage along miles of the shoreline – submerged tanks and upturned boats; burned trucks and shell-shattered Jeeps; the sad little personal belongings strewn on the beach; plus bodies of soldiers lying in rows, covered with blankets; and other bodies still sprawling in the sand or half hidden by high grass behind the beach.

We started to bring the ammunition in on 'ducks'. After we secured a position, we stockpiled the stuff. But there was still small-arms fire, artillery fire, mortar attacks, and land mines – and there were casualties.

I made about a dozen trips back to the coaster. Later I dug a hole three feet deep right over the hill, and the others in my company dug in all around me. My hole was like a grave. I inflated a life preserver, and that was my bed. But I couldn't sleep at all. The night was full of anti-aircraft fire and explosions. The next morning, I saw that I was close to a bomb that was sticking in the ground and hadn't exploded.

Once organized, we took care of hundreds, and then thousands, of landing crafts. And ships dumped tons of material and thousands of vehicles. For many days, the front itself was close enough for German artillery to reach the beaches. Storms which interrupted operations and enemy air raids added to the difficulties. We organized into 16-men crews to discharge general cargo into dumb barges for storage on the beach, but we were handicapped in unloading cargo by casualties. The battalion was reorganized and the working periods lengthened until this deficiency was corrected by securing replacements.

- Sergeant John Feninez, Jr., 5th Engineer Special Brigade, United States Army

Sgt. Feninez went on to serve in the Rhineland campaign and received the Bronze Star for "meritorious achievement in ground combat...". He was promoted to First Sergeant in March 1945. Shortly before his death in 2005, Sgt. Feninez received the Legion of Honor, the highest decoration awarded by France, for "distinguished military services on the battlefields of France." John's younger brother Michael was killed in action on June 22, 1944, as part of the 82nd Airborne Division's Normandy operations near Sainte-Mere-Eglise. Three other Feninez brothers also saw action in World War II – Franklin in the Navy, George in the Army Air Forces, and Stephen in the Army.