

BERNARD W. NIDER STORY
World War II Veteran

The attached story is taken from the book *Operation Recognition – Honoring Nebraska War Veterans* written and published by Ivan Schoone.

NIDER, BERNARD W.

A veteran from Lincoln was very kind in sending me a step by step account of what took place on June 6, 1944, D-Day, the invasion of Normandy by American, Canadian and British forces. This individual, a Nebraskan, was one of the first to hit the beaches when the historic invasion took place. This is his story, one he wrote in remembrance of the 50th anniversary of D-Day, June 6, 1994. It is lengthy but I feel it important to print it in its entirety so the reader can picture from the story what the invasion was like. What it took so freedom could be preserved.

For those who do not know for sure what D-Day stands for, Bernard W. Nider explains it. It was a designated day that time was measured from. For example, D-3, meaning 3 days before or D+3, signifying days after the day. All schedules at the time were set around that designated day, 6-June-1944.

Nider was born and raised on a farm near Plymouth Nebraska. He was attending the University of Nebraska in the spring of 1943 when the war was beginning to really get going. It was announced that if he would join the Army Reserves he would have a better chance of staying in school. He was only 18 at the time. He felt that his chances of staying in school were good so he joined. He was called up in 30 days.

Off he went to basic training in Camp Robinson, Arkansas. Then transferred to Camp Fannin, Texas. After 13 weeks of training, he was sent to Camp Sharks in New York. He boarded the Lle de France and then was off to Glasgow Scotland. He was then put on a train to go to the southern part of England near a town called Plymouth, which probably reminded him of his own hometown.

It was around midnight when the troops were called to gather in a large building. Their names were called and they were assigned to a unit. Nider met his Company Commander now for the first time. His name was Captain James Madill. Commander Major Howie and the Regimental Commander Col. Canham also greeted the new troop. About 115 of the guys Nider was with went to the 2nd Bn, 116th Infantry Regiment. The Colonel told them, "You men have a lot going for you because you are young and that is what is needed for the operation that you will be training for." They were loaded on trucks and transported to barracks at Bristol, England.

Training was rigorous with camping out on moors, lots of forced marches of 25 miles and amphibious training. Aboard the U.S.S. Thomas Jefferson, they would climb down the cargo net with pack and M-1 rifle, onto a landing craft with the exercises conducted at Slapton Sands, a beach in England similar to the one they would land on in France all too soon. They made their first landing on Slapton Sands the day Operation Tiger took place when German U-boats sank many of the landing craft of the 4th Infantry Division killing about 800 men.

It was around mid May of 1944 that the men in Niders company were issued their battle gear. They wore impregnated clothing to aid to protect the wearer from gas attacks. Combat field jackets were issued that held pockets for hand grenades, ammo, satchel charges and medical packets. A new M-1 rifle was also offered but few took a new one because they preferred the one they were used too. As Nider refers to as "Old Faithful,"

It was time now to find yourself a buddy. Nider found an older guy by the name of Fred Bitsig, a veteran who had already made two landings in Italy. "I learned a lot from him" Nider recalls. Bitsig instructed Nider how to assemble his pack. "Don't put anything in there that you will need" Bitsig told him. He would leave it in the landing craft anyway because of the need to be as mobile as possible. "There will be plenty of stuff laying around that you can pick up" Bitsig assured him.

May 25, 1944, at reveille, Capt. Madill announced they would be moving out at 9 a.m. He told them they could plan to be gone for 30 days so pack up for it and they would be leaving as soon as the trucks arrived. Sure enough, 9 a.m. sharp, the trucks arrived and they found themselves on their way to the Marshalling area at Weymouth. With so many troops and equipment in this area, it took Nider and his buddy hours to get where they were suppose to go. When they finally arrived, tents were set up with an open mess outside. Then the rains began. It poured, tents collapsed, "It was a real mess" Nider said. This phase was referred to as "Operation Overlord."

June 1, began with chow at 8 a.m. Then they marched over to the U.S.S. Thomas Jefferson and went aboard. "That was a gift from God to get out of that mud hole" Nider recalls. After doing some calisthenics, having lunch, receiving instructions from officers, more equipment was issued. Bunches of belly life preservers were to be fastened to ammo bandoleer shells of all kinds, bangalore torpedoes, and everything was waterproofed so it could float ashore because they would be landing during low tide.

After four days on the ship, it became crowded. Everyone became edgy because the ship was appearing to get smaller by each passing day. There was trouble at the dice games with many hot heads getting into fights.

Nider said they had a great group of officers with about one half being West Point graduates. At this time they had become attached to the 16th Infantry Regiment Combat team and were the 116th Regt. Combat Team taking orders from the "Big Red One." Their officers worked very closely with them and they respected their officers.

The weather simply would not cooperate and caused the invasion to be delayed. But on the 5th of June they saw a little sunshine but the winds were still quite severe. That night, Nider went to bed about 11 p.m. He could feel the ship moving but had not received any orders at

this time other than the exception of being sent to their quarters because of all the fights that had broken out.

On June 6, at 2 a.m., the Navy boatsmen blew a whistle and shouted to all Navy hands, "Man your battle stations!" He blew his whistle again and told all assault teams to gather at the mess. Unlike normal gatherings at the mess they were allowed to "buck the line."

After mess, the assault teams were instructed to go board the landing craft. But the sea was very rough. As the landing crafts were lowered into the water, they bobbed around like corks. The cargo nets, which the men were to climb down the ship on, were whipping out and back against the ship. They were ordered to climb down in spite of the roughness of the sea and winds. The first five guys got about half way down when the cargo net swung out away from the ship causing the men to have their feet become knocked out from the net. Hanging by their hands on the net, they were slammed against the ship smashing their fists forcing them to let go, falling to their death.

Capt. Madill said, "No more of this, we are going to top load." Navy men argued that the winches and cables would not be strong enough to lower both the craft and men. Madill reminded them they would do it anyway and they did. Now, Nider says, "We were all bobbing around like corks in the landing craft."

Aboard landing craft, LCVP 13, Nider's craft was blessed with a good Coxswain. He and his assistant knew how to maneuver the craft in spite of the waters. They had made landings before. "They were a real asset to our landing section" Nider writes.

Their landing craft circled until all landing crafts were in the water. They were to meet at a given rendezvous point and then head toward their destination. But the sea was so rough that water kept coming over the top of the craft's ramp and sides. Pumps aboard were not able to pump it off fast enough so the men used their helmets to bail so the craft wouldn't sink.

It may have been somewhat of a blessing they had to bail because, as Nider said, "it kept our minds off what was coming up."

The Navy was shelling the beach heavily. The Battleship Texas and the Arkansas combined with destroyers and cruisers, "Were getting with it" Nider remembers. As they looked toward the beach, they also noted air support with the 8th Air Force giving it all they had.

Problems continued to plague the combat team. A LCM ship was on duty that was converted to fire missiles from its deck. This was a new era in weaponry, the use of missiles. The missiles could have been a real asset if they would have had a guidance system that worked. They wiped out a company of the 116th Regimental Combat Team, with only a few surviving. "I am sure we killed a lot of our own people but with an operation as large as that, it could be expected" Nider concludes.

As they continued heading toward the beach, winds caused them to drift about 2 miles off course, off to the left. They were to land on the

beach code named, "Easy Green" but they ended up in the 16th Regimental area of the Big Red One which they were attached to. By this time they were all about deaf from the noise, but when they were ready to land it seemed like the noise stopped Nider said, as the Coxswain stated, "I will put you on the sand even if I never get off again." He gave it full throttle, he did hit the sand as fire began from German pillboxes and their 88's.

Nider and his buddy Bitsig were located at the rear of the craft when it hit the beach. The Coxswain told them to jump in the water and they did just before the craft was hit again by crossfire in the middle of the craft. Nider and Bitsig were now the only ones who remained healthy as Nider puts it. Using the protection of the remaining portion of the landing craft, the two contemplated what their next move should be.

"What are we going to do" Nider inquired of Bitsig. Bitsig told Nider to look at their firing pattern. Whenever a shell or mortar shell explodes and the sand flies in the air, they would change to a different area. There was also a lot of other landing craft getting close to the same area now. Bitsig advised that when a shell hits and creates a hole in the sand, head for it while the sand was still in the air. They did that a couple of times and then they got the idea that if they would throw their own satchel charges and blow the sand in the air they could make even more headway. "By God it worked" Nider stated.

The two made it to the sea wall, among the first ones to make it. Nider still wonders how they missed all that lead that was flying through the air that horrible day. "It was a real slaughter" he said.

Within the next 30 minutes, more troops were attempting to land on the beaches. More were killed or wounded, and a lot of them were about to give up because of their wounds. "It was looking real bad" he said.

The sea wall was about 20 feet high. The Germans could not hit them with their machine guns now but were throwing sledgehammer grenades at them below the sea wall. The second wave of landing crafts were now on their way in and "they were really getting hammered" Nider said. The tide by now had come farther in and the landing crafts were now hitting obstacles on the beach that were mined by the enemy. "They were blowing the hell out of them, unloading troops in 10 feet of water with all their gear. They were just sitting ducks" Nider said.

At about 10 a.m. they were becoming a little better organized although the shock was tough on everyone. They had succumbed to the fact that, "We just have to push them back before they kill all of us" Nider said.

Nider and Bitsig walked up the beach looking for leadership. They had none, they were all gone. They ran across a navy man leaning up against the sea wall. Bitsig asked him if he had any good ideas. The navy man informed them that a blue box that had a radio in it was slowly washing ashore. If it didn't get blown to kingdom come before it

made it, they could contact the Ancon, the ship command for the invasion. They decided to go for it. Bitsig warned the others that if the Germans spotted them and the box, they would destroy it.

The Navy did a good job of painting it. It blended in with the color of the sea. They found a rope with a grapple hook on it and tossed it at the box but missed it. Another guy came over and said, "Let me lasso it" cutting off the grapple hook and he got the box the first throw. "Talk about a morale builder" Nider states.

They set up the radio, it worked and they contacted the Ancon, which was the very first message that Ancon had received from the beach. The Navy man told them to send some ships to knock out the pillboxes. "If you do not, it will be a *Mayday*" he reminded them. Soon two or three ships came to their area and took out the pillboxes that had been firing on them when they came to shore. Nider and his friends fired tracers at others in the ravines to show the ships their location. The Germans seemed to become even more active now.

Machine guns by now had been set up but barbwire had to be blown up in order to get something going as Nider puts it. They couldn't move forward. Some officers were also now on scene and instructed the mortar crews to put some shells in the trenches to pin the Germans down long enough to get at the barbwire.

A soldier on the mortar crew told an officer they didn't have enough ammo. The officer quickly reminded him to send what they had because they wouldn't need it where they were located anyway. With the help of the Navy, and the mortar fire, they finally made it to the last of the barb wire entanglements.

"You cannot imagine the slaughter," Nider said. "I have to give credit to the officers, the main one being Major Bingham. "He did a good job! We had to either fight or die!" he added.

When they got to the top they started gaining control. The beachhead was being established and the Germans were not prepared for ground battle even though they still had the advantage.

At 4 p.m., the officers told their men they "Had to either fight and kick the hell out of them or we are dead." Nider said they did just that but not without the cost of many of their own.

There was not much humor that day but Nider mentions a young GI coming up to Major Bingham in the trenches tapping him on the shoulder and inquiring. "Do you know where such and such Glider Bn is?" With each officer scrambling for troops due to the huge losses, Bingham told the GI to stay with them. "We will take care of you and we do not want you to go out there and get lost. Your outfit isn't due here until tomorrow." The kid laughed and said, "I think I will stay here!" He stayed with them all the way to St. Lo.

Nider concludes his story with a fact that he feels was never written down in any history books about D-Day. "I think it was one of the turning points on Omaha beach" he says.

It was about 4 p.m. when a one star general, about 45 years old, appeared on the front line and gave an order. Nider had never seen him before or ever again. His order was that if any Germans wanted to surrender they would have, at that moment, time to do so. The shelling stopped and the Germans were assured that if they did surrender, they would live. It worked, as 35 Germans surrendered and Nider was one of the American soldier's that led the German prisoners down to the beach. Spaced about 75 feet apart, the remaining Germans did not want to risk shooting any of their own so they also ceased fire. Nider said he has been trying to locate this General and has been unsuccessful thus far. Unfortunately, he did not find out his name in the midst of turmoil of D-day.

Even in spite of the fact that the thing that happened on Omaha beach was disorganized the beachhead was taken. Bear in mind it was done by young people that played a large part in the victory that day. "We confused the Germans. They couldn't figure out our line of attack. The first thing they knew that afternoon is that we were everywhere" Nider states.

The invasion was the biggest day of Nider's life and wonders to himself why he is even able to talk about it 50 some odd years later. "I am very proud to be an American with the freedom we have. We must never let that be taken away from us" Nider said.

For a bit of history about the Normandy invasion, it consisted of a 50-mile stretch of coast where the attack took place. The Allied armada of 700 warships and 2,700 support ships with 2,500 landing craft closed in on the beaches. In the first six days, 326,000 men, 54,000 vehicles and 104,000 tons of stores were landed.

A member of the 29th Division wrote a book named "Hedgerow Hell." His closing statement was, "War is hell" and this, "Was a hell of a war!" Nider concluded.