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Forum

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Charlie

by Archangelo Leone

June 19, 1944 was a day of clouds driven by the greatest storm in the English Channel ever experienced by an invading army. The sky high rolling waves battered every landing craft, docks and wreaked havoc along the beaches in Normandy. My landing ship, Coast Guard LST 27, was in the middle of a watery hell. The day would soon claim hundreds of lives as moored mines broke loose with the fury of the storm. We rammed into a sunken wreck and were stuck; unable to move in any direction! The bow lookout, Joe "Bitso" Coulson informed the conning tower of our dire predicament. Our signalman contacted an LST approaching our flank to inform them they should take our place at once in the landing pattern. It was LST 523, carrying the 300th Combat Engineers. I was walking topside for some reason in this storm of storms when LST 523 drew abreast of our starboard side, en route to the Utah landing beach. The troops were in a line, washing their mess kits when it happened. I gasped at the horror of a daytime nightmare as LST 523 was split in two by a muffled explosion. The bow and stern sections seemed to hang forever in the air then landed amid curtains of bloody debris and broken bodies. My body refused to move as I watched the stern settle slowly into the English Channel, a naval officer caught in the rigging above. He was a goner, I thought. The mountainous waves soon covered the watery grave as survivors of the landing ship tried to stay afloat. I saw crewman of LST 523 feverishly climbing aboard life rafts, assisting others at the same time. There were men from the 300th clinging to floating wreckage, arms locked with sailors who were badly injured. Nightmare.

The crew of LST 523 had dogged the watertight doors shut before leaping into the frigid water of the English Channel. As result, the bow section remained afloat, enabling survivors to drop

the balsa life rafts overboard and to hand out Kapok life jackets. I saw it all and still remained frozen in my tracks. I did not believe what I saw. The scene was so unreal it defied description.

I was a horrified witness to all this and I could not move. Others did act however and I saw LCVP's and other small boats braving the storm to rescue hundreds of survivors. One LCVP was manned by a naval officer who was lifting an injured soldier aboard, assisted by a crewman. There was a gaping wound in the chest of the combat engineer. As the waves swept the craft away, I saw the officer in foul weather gear bend over the soldier, administering plasma.

On board LST 523 at the time of the explosion was Charlie "Buddy" Olive, corporal in Company B, 3rd Platoon, 300th Combat Engineers Battalion. Buddy was a lucky man because had he been below deck, he would have perished with the others. That's what they call fate, I guess.

Charlie got off the stricken vessel somehow but he was seriously wounded, a gash running from his back to part of his head. The huge waves picked him and others up, carrying them towards the landing beaches in Normandy where shore medical units treated the injured men. At least 90 men in the army unit died along with many of the LST 523's crew. It was one big day in hell.

Many years later, I was contacted by Charlie's son-in-law who dumped a load of bad memories into my lap. I had forgotten about LST 523 and I didn't know Charlie. With a lot of help from Mike Koch, Charlie's son-in-law, I was able to recall the events of that horrible day in April of 1944. (I was still eighteen years old at the time and had just started to shave.) We kept memories of Charlie alive. Today he occupies a place on the 300th Combat Engineers website.

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The story is in honor of Charlie "Buddy" Olive of Texas and his son-in-law, Mike Koch, who saw Charlie caught at times in the red tape of the Veterans Administration.

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