Sacred Ground

I had heard and read many stories about D-Day, June 6, 1944, and was reminded of it many years after the battle when I served in the Marine Corps, but nothing in my dreams would affect me as much as when I walked on the beaches of Normandy, France, in August of 2010.

As I looked at the clear blue sky and the calm waves breaking on the beach, I could see a few posts still poking out of the water 30 yards from shore; a reminder of what had gone on there so many years ago. I saw something that had washed up on the sand. I picked it up and examined its distorted, copper-looking, green-stained appearance. After close examination, I concluded that it might be a brass .50 caliber bullet. Where had it come from? I pictured it coming from a German machine gun. Holding the piece tightly in my hand and feeling the battle in my bones, it all came together. This is my story.

The Allied warships continued to fire thousands of artillery rounds at Normandy Beach to make way for the invasion. Heavy rope nets hung over the side of the troop carrier. Staff Sergeant Dave Watson six foot two, sandy hair, rough features was an easy going was a thirty two year old career soldier, who enlisted at eighteen, led his platoon of 33 men down the heavy nets into the landing craft 30 feet below. The soldiers carried weapons, ammo, and personal supplies (weighing 75-110 pounds) on their backs. The seas were rough, and the wind was blowing hard. The landing craft bounced up and down, making it difficult for the soldiers to stand upright. One of the soldiers was crushed between the ship and the landing craft, never to be

seen again except for his helmet, which popped back into the boat. Overhead, the noise from the Allied battleship and cruiser guns was deafening.

Loaded with troops, hundreds of landing craft headed for five Normandy beaches and circled into position to line up for a planned attack, giving most of the soldiers only a few minutes to live on this earth. This would be the first wave of troops to hit the beach. The Germans were ready and in position, and even though they had been pounded for hours by the massive guns of dozens of Allied ships, the heavy, reinforced bunkers the Germans were defending were still in place.

As Watson's landing craft got closer to the shore of Omaha Beach, the ship guns went silent. The Allied ships and airplanes had fired and dropped hundreds of thousands of artillery projectiles and bombs on the Germans for two and a half hours, hoping to clear the way for the troops to advance inland. Peeking out from under his helmet at the rough, smoke-filled sea, 18-year-old Private Tim Hanford and his good friend Private First Class Frank Arnold felt anxious, confused, yet sure of themselves. They would conquer the Germans. With all that firepower directed at the beach, there would surely be only a few Germans left when they got there.

The only sound now was the roaring noise of the landing craft's heavy engines. This was a good sign that the German artillery was knocked out. They could see hundreds of other craft like theirs heading for shore on Omaha Beach.

"Get your head down if you want ta keep it on your shoulders!" yelled a squad sergeant.

Second Lieutenant Myers—a platoon commander only seven months out of OCS—was in the rear and remained silent. The men were all certain that they weren't going to die that day. Hell, they were the best soldiers in the world, and they were going to kill Hitler and his Germans.

As the boats reached 400 yards from shore in a light fog, the German guns started firing their embedded artillery and machine guns from every direction. Bullets and projectiles exploded all around the boats. Some of the landing craft were blown out of the water, killing the soldiers, or drowning the survivors as the heavy weight of their gear weighed them down.

Where did the Germans come from? thought Tim. *They couldn't have survived all that firepower.* He realized for the first time that this was no game. Tim's anxiety turned into restlessness and fear. This was not what he had expected, even though he had been instructed many times that this might happen.

The landing craft next to him was blown to bits. Body parts, metal, and wood landed all around him. At 150 feet from shore, in four feet of water at low tide, Sergeant Watson's landing craft came to an abrupt stop to avoid the defense barriers. Tim saw another landing craft close by get blown up and disintegrate right before his eyes.

All the troops fell forward from the sudden stop of their boat. Gear, weapons, and men were scattered all over. Blood, debris, and body parts from the exploded craft to their right fell on top of them. It was hell.

As the craft's gate opened, the troops stumbled around and tried to assemble their gear. In their fright, some of their personal stuff was left behind.

"Move out! Move! Move! Move!" yelled Watson, his tall body turning sideways as he led his platoon. One anxious squad sergeant jumped in front of him, only to be hit several times with .50 caliber machine gun fire. He fell, instantly dead, in front of everyone, blocking the bullets from hitting Watson. Scared, the platoon piled out and fell, one after another, tripping over dead comrades, being hit by massive gunfire, and sinking into the water.

Private First Class Frank Arnold fell face-down immediately after leaving the landing craft. His entire body, loaded with gear, sank in four feet of water. He gasped for air while bullets sang through the water around him, some ripping into his pack. He felt a foot on his back pushing him into the sandy bottom. The red-stained sea water gagged him. Private Arnold released his pack, and emerged to the surface, choking and spitting up seawater. He moved forward, gasping for air, swimming and crawling toward shore like a crab.

Sergeant Watson stumbled forward, only to be stopped by steel Belgiomy gates with mines set every few feet. But the tide was low, and he found an opening where the ships' guns had blown sections apart. Passing through, he scrambled blindly through smoke and debris to the next objective 33 yards away, where wooden posts were placed tightly together, pointed at a 30-degree angle toward the sea.

Ten yards from the shoreline in the water, Frank hid behind two dead bodies for protection. Scared out of his wits and throwing up, he tried to dig out the sand below the water to get away from this hell, sinking deeper as the blood-stained water from the freshly killed bodies lapped around him. Frank, five foot eight with sandy blond hair, was a well-built kid. He had dropped out of high school after the 11th grade to join the Army to help defend his country. His mother had pleaded with him not to go, to finish his education. She cried at the train depot when he said goodbye. Now he lay in the shallow, salty water, his heart pounding, death almost certain. Death appeared all around him from exploding artillery fire, and bullets whizzed by, directed at the second wave of soldiers hitting the beach behind him. He needed to move out of that killing field, but was too frightened to move. The upper body of a dead soldier, blown in half, fell beside him. The man's eyes and mouth were moving, but no words came out. In horror

and shock, Frank started crying for his mother, knowing that she was right and that he should have listened to her. All he wanted to do was go home and hold her in his arms.

Blood and body parts were scattered all around. It was a massacre. Bullets and artillery fire came from all directions. It was every man for himself. In some positions, when a landing craft's gate dropped, a German machine gunner would lock on the soldiers coming out of the craft and kill one behind the other as they departed. "Like shooting fish in a barrel," quoted a German after the war.

The Germans had established a line of fire according to the tide, determining where the landing craft would hit the sand and stop, thereby allowing them to create a predetermined wall of bullets and artillery fire crisscrossing at different angles. Men were being slaughtered and were falling, many of them before clearing the crafts' gates. Those on the first wave hitting the water had little chance of survival. There were two kinds of men on the beach; those who were dead, and those that were going to be dead.

Cautiously approaching the wooden-post barrier, Watson and a few others threw grenades in front of them, hoping to clear out any mines that would kill or cripple them. Watson and his fellow soldiers tried to find a way past or over the structure. He found it hard to lead without the familiar faces of his platoon. Up until this moment, Watson had been too busy to be scared, but seeing all the dead and injured soldiers around him made him realize that he was caught in a death trap. His entire platoon had been wiped out. The soldiers he had trained and had become like a father to were no longer in the fight. He felt alone, abandoned; lost in a strange land surrounded by dead, wounded, and living soldiers and an enemy that was determined to kill them. It was too much. His heart ached for his men. He was scared that his life

would end on this beach. Watson started talking to God in a hurry. “If you save me, I’ll do whatever you want for the rest of my life.”

Trapped, he and the other approaching soldiers gathered behind the angled posts for some protection until a demolition crew came forward, set a charge 15 yards away, and blew a large opening through the posts. Sand and debris rained over the men, clearing a mine-free pathway for another 30yards.

Exhausted, Sergeant Watson ran, then crawled and fell behind an eight-foot buildup of sand and rock constructed by the Germans to stop tanks and expose their vulnerable undersides. This gave the troops a place to rest out of the direct line of fire. Other soldiers arrived, and the troops gathered together to plan the next attack. Under cover, an officer appeared and called to the sergeants for a discussion on how they were to scale the bank and make a passageway through the razor wire 28 yards away. New platoons were formed with what was left of the straggling soldiers, and a plan was set.

One rifle squad of 13 men and a two-man demolition crew led by Watson, with a Bangalore torpedo (a long metal pipe filled with explosives) waited to move out together over the eight-foot sand wall to the heavily defended and mined razor wire. The rest of the troops behind the wall would fire at the Germans with bazookas, mortars, rifles, and machine guns, to help defend the demolition team. It was a death trap, but it had to be done. After that, they had 75 yards to go to reach the bottom of a steep hillside, and then the soldiers would have to fight their way up a ravine to the top of the cliff. They waited for designated tanks to assist, but the 30 tanks that were in route behind the second wave of troops had dropped in deeper water because of high tides. Twenty-seven of them sank, along with their men.

"Fuck," said the captain. "We gotta get out of here. The krauts are zeroing in on us. First team prepare to move. Go!"

Out in the open, the squad became a turkey shoot. Close to the wire, they hit a mine. The Bangalore fell to the ground. The captain sent a second platoon to replace the first one. As he looked out from behind the sand wall, he was shot through the head. Watson and one other survivors of the newly formed platoon left the sand wall and started crawling among the dead and wounded. Watson had no time to assist them.

Seeing another advancing squad behind him, he got up and yelled, "Let's go!" He ran and zigzagged as bullets flew around him. A new group of two demolition men and 13 soldiers followed. In front of him, just a few yards away, lay coiled razor wire hooked to steel posts. Diving for the sand to keep from being killed, Watson instantly looked around and saw more soldiers falling from gunshots and artillery.

Watson heard a cry.

"Sergeant!"

Tim—tall and skinny handsome private, with dark brown wavy hair; nine months out of high school, and a native from Chicago—was lying in the yellow sand behind him, shaking with fear and shitting his pants, while frantically digging a hole with his rifle butt. "What can we do, Sergeant? What can we do?"

"What the? Tim! Stay down. Stay down! Don't come any closer; there are mines all over the place."

Watson heard a roar behind him. He looked back and saw an American tank coming forward, elevated over the sandy wall into which a hole had been blown. Again and again, the tank fired as it moved into position behind him, slowing down the enemy fire.

Another demolition crew was moving up near him, only to be blown to pieces. Two men were mortally wounded, and one lay on the sand calling for help. Looking back, Watson saw the twisted Bangalore and one of the demolition men, who was barely moving.

"You're bleeding. Are you okay? Can you set a charge?"

"I think so," said the man, shaking the sand from his head.

"Good, help me with another Bangalore. Yours has been damaged. Let's blow up that fucking wire. Tim, I need your help. Shake it off. Get over here. If we stay here, we'll die."

Three other soldiers came running up. Two were instantly shot. The wounded demolition man crawled, got up, and staggered forward with the sergeant. They picked up the Bangalore with the assistance of others, and moved forward. They shoved the long Bangalore under the wire. Sergeant Watson crawled over and grabbed two large wire cutters, one hooked to the torso of a dead demolition soldier and the other lying in the sand a few feet away.

"Everybody move back!" yelled one of the men. "Fire in the hole!"

"Move back!" yelled Watson to Tim. "And hold on to this."

He handed Tim the wire cutters. Everyone moved back.

The explosion opened up a pathway under the wire, but hanging wires had to be cut to free up the movement of the soldiers.

"Tim, ya need to help me. Grab your cutters. Tim, goddamn it, get with it. Tim!"

The young soldier snapped out of his stupor and crawled over to assist the sergeant, who was already in the hole lying on his back, frantically cutting the dangling wire away. Shaking, machine bullets zipping above him, Tim joined in the cutting while the other soldiers with them defended their position. Another soldier with wire cutters helped.

The American tank, now 10 yards away, was hit by a large projectile and was disabled. A few soldiers hid behind it for protection, firing at the well-concealed, reinforced concrete bunkers where the Germans were positioned.

"We got to get the hell outta here! We got to get outta here before those fucking krauts zero in on our position, or we'll all be dead," swore the sergeant.

A round hit the edge of the hole, and piles of yellow sand and debris covered them. Soldiers behind the built-up sand wall 28 yards away waited for an all-clear sign before advancing.

"The sooner we remove this wire, the faster we'll be out of here."

It seemed like hours, but the strands of wire were removed in a couple of minutes. Watson knew his plan of going 75 yards to the cliff edge was a death sentence, but he had no other choice. Staying where he was wasn't an option. Besides, being an experienced, battle-hardened soldier, he was there to fight and kill Germans.

A box of smoke grenades was brought to them, and Watson, Tim, and others tossed them forward.

"All clear!" yelled Watson. "Move out!"

Running, the bent-over soldiers made their way through the smoke, wildly shooting and dodging enemy machine guns and artillery to the bank of the steep cliff, which protected them from direct fire. A third of them didn't make it. Other soldiers followed. A direct hit on the wire opening killed a half-dozen men, but made the passageway bigger, providing a wider gap for more soldiers to make it through...and for more to get killed.

Sergeant Watson, a clear-headed combat veteran, was giving orders and directing the troops. The men were unorganized, but they started randomly firing, with little effect on the Germans.

"We have to keep movin'. They're zeroing in on us!" shouted Watson.

Looking back to where he had just come from, he saw dead and wounded men scattered across the sand. No medics could help them. Men were falling and dying, but others kept coming, and the Germans had their hands full killing and wounding hundreds of soldiers. Some of the enemy were running out of bullets.

"I need machine guns and mortars up front, right now!" yelled Watson.

Two machine gunners appeared; one was hit, and another took his place and set up the position. Mortar crews moved close to the safety of the hill and began firing, clearing the enemy position at the top of the ravine. A group of engineers appeared and started installing rope ladders, driving in steel stakes to connect the ropes to the steep grade of the ravine. They slowly made their way up the ravine.

Frightened officers and men followed Watson's lead, until he was wounded by shrapnel. Tim looked over and saw that the sergeant was bleeding badly. He followed the sergeant's body as it slid down the hill a few feet, then grabbed the sergeant with the assistance of others, to keep him from falling further.

"Sergeant!" yelled Tim. He heard a low moan.

"Keep movin," shouted an officer, "or you'll die out here!"

A corpsman appeared. "I got em."

"Which way?" shouted the same officer from behind Tim, bleeding and confused by the smoke and explosions.

"This way!" yelled Tim, knowing he could do nothing more for his sergeant. He led the troops up the ravine with his loaded M1 rifle slung over his shoulder.

The theory is if you deploy masses of soldiers, some will make it. Lieutenant Myers's body was brought back in the landing craft along with others who were killed or wounded. The craft never made it back after the second time it took a crew to shore. Myers was buried in the American cemetery in Normandy. Only four of 33 men survived in Watson's platoon on D-Day, and of those, three were wounded.

Frank Arnold never fired a shot. He crawled forward through an opening in the Belgiomy gates and across the sand, his head just high enough to keep the tide from drowning him while finding other bodies to hide behind.

By afternoon, most of the German positions were cleared. Medics and others started removing the dead and wounded. The tide was advancing, and Frank crawled and fell into a large pit left by a massive artillery explosion. As the day went on, he became delirious and dreamed he was in a volcano that was threatening to erupt, sending him to his death. He ran up the sides to escape, but kept falling back. Then a bunch of giant Germans appeared. He looked up and saw that they were holding artillery cannon pieces pointed at his face.

"Please don't kill me. I want to go home."

"Can't go home," said one of the soldiers in English. "You mus' die, and ve are here to kill you."

"I haven't fired a shot. I haven't killed anyone. Here, take my rifle. You can see it has not been fired."

"Ve are waiting for the Furor."

Hitler appeared and gave the command to fire. Frank jumped and felt his body being lifted.

"Hey, this one's still alive," said a medic.

Frank was carefully taken back with the wounded and later reassigned to what was left of his battalion, which advanced and fought across the French countryside.

Looking down at the beach from a cliff on Utah Beach, the next beach over, I observed the area below me. I felt the earth shake, the guns roar, and the dead falling. Machine gun positions had been set up where I was standing, and an artillery emplacement was a hundred yards away. In fact, the Germans had heavy reinforced concrete emplacements established all along the coast every 300 yards. They were built using French forced labor. It was murder, like shooting men lined up for chow. How the hell did those soldiers ever make it? It had to be an extraordinary effort, paired with determination and luck, to avoid being killed.

On Utah Beach, Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr. had led his troops. I had always wondered about him being born of privilege, as he was the son of Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States from 1898-1906.

The 4th Infantry Division, 8th Regiment, and 70th Tank Battalion drifted more than one mile from their landing objective on Utah Beach—a result of the fierce winds, heavy waves, and

the tide. The troops were led by Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., who was sickly with heart problems and arthritis. He was the highest ranking officer and the oldest, at 56, to land on the beach that morning. Theodore, affectionately called "Teddy," was loved by his men. The commander arrived on the first wave, leading his troops. Walking with the aid of a cane and carrying a .45 pistol, he made a reconnaissance of the area immediately to the rear of the beach to locate a causeway to be used to advance inland.

"We'll start the war right here," stated Ted.

With complete success and little confusion while German artillery was exploding close by, bullets flying in every direction, he assumed the position of traffic cop. Cool and calm, Roosevelt untangled traffic jams of tanks, trucks, and personnel carriers while clouds of earth from the guns fell down upon him. His men, at seeing their beloved, sickly general standing before them under fire, were inspired and succeeded in conquering the heavily defended hill above with minor casualties.

Theodore Roosevelt Jr., the assistant division commander, was completely unconcerned about personal danger. He loved his men and wanted to lead them and be with them. Before the assault, Ted had asked his senior commander for permission to make the landing along with his troops, but was denied three times. He wouldn't give up. He wrote a convincing letter stating that he needed to be with his troops. His superior officer finally gave him the approval, and his division commander stated, "Teddy will never make it out of Utah Beach alive." But he did, and for his bravery he posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor; the highest honor in the nation. Sadly, in July of 1944, over a month after his landing on Utah Beach, he suffered a heart attack and died at Meautis, 22 km from Sainte-Mère-Église.

On the top of the hill, I examined some of the thick, steel-reinforced German bunkers. Some damage was done, but most were still resting in place as a reminder of those boys' bravery in capturing them. Fingering the bullet in my pocket that I had found in the sand, I turned and headed back down to the beach. The tide was low. Skipping around as the small waves broke and touched my shoes, I rubbed the disfigured .50 caliber bullet between my fingers for the last time. My story was complete. The bullet did not belong to me; it belonged to the memory of those who had participated and died on that day in 1944, and to those who came after. Looking at that piece of metal one more time, I drew back my arm and tossed it as far as I could to a safe place in the ocean to rest. Maybe in the far future, it will be discovered again, and another story will emerge about that infamous day, July 6, 1944. Those soldiers will never be forgotten because there will always be something or someone to remind us of them and their heroism. That terrible day changed the world.

I quietly walked away from the beach and that hallowed ground in Normandy. Although I was never in combat, I was a Marine many years after the Normandy landing. The place moved me. I felt the battle, and the soldiers whose lives were lost or crippled to give us freedom from tyranny. This was a place so sacred and beyond emotion that my body shook and tears came to my eyes, knowing that so many young men—men who never had a chance to fully grow up, have relationships, a family, experience adult life, or fulfill their dreams—had died on that beach. These were the heroes who sacrificed their lives for us. It must never be forgotten what they did there, what they sacrificed there, or what they accomplished.

Upon entering the American and Allied graveyards nearby, I observed the beautiful white marble grave crosses marking the graves of those who had fallen. As far as I could see, the crosses filled the landscape. Every cross was the same, except for a few that indicated a different

spiritual belief. What amazed me was that to identify who those victims were, I had to walk up close to the crosses and read the inscription. Private so and so; sergeant so and so; captain so and so; major so and so; General Theodore Roosevelt Jr.

They were all heroes. They all died fighting for us, freeing the rest of the world from tyranny. It took all of them to conquer their objective. They did it together; one could not do it without the other. When one fell, another took his place. In battle rank has priority, but leadership prevails in life-or-death situations, no matter one's rank.