

Eyewitness at D-Day Ellsworth Nightingale (1925-2010)

Editor's note: Falmouth native Ellsworth Nightingale left high school to join the navy in 1942, serving as a gunner's mate third class. In 2001 he wrote a private memoir now in the archives of Museums on the Green. This handwritten document was transcribed by volunteer Maria Ward. The tale has been excerpted from the memoir.



ELLSWORTH F. NIGHTINGALE

Things began to get very hectic at Roseneath [Scotland]. It was widely known that “something big” was near. Several units at the base were all suddenly told to put some gear aboard LSTs and transports. My transportation to Portsmouth, England was by a fishing trawler and then I boarded an LCI (landing craft infantry) to France.

Portsmouth was one of many ports where thousands of troops were amassed for one of the largest armadas that the world had ever seen and hopefully, will ever see again. There were hundreds of boats and ships of every description, from Canada, the United States, and England. This operation included Air Force, glider troops, Navy and special amphibious forces.

There were about 150 of us on each LCI and [we] transported over with LCM and rafts in tow filled with explosive materials. We were given our final destination orders and knew the type of job that had to be done. On the way over we were frankly told that many of us would be killed. Now that was a very comforting thought. The price of freedom was going to be expensive.

There was no time to learn the identity of the men you were with. Not knowing the men's names added to the feeling of being totally alone. There are many war movies out today but movies can't portray the inner feelings of futility. When your craft nears shore, even your soul is scared not knowing what will happen next. “Will I be hurt or worse—killed? Will anything save me?” To be sure, you know that you must disable the enemy or you will be killed.

Those thoughts, the minutes before, are almost unbearable, which almost tears your insides apart. These are the things missing in movies that is absolutely impossible to describe.



Nightingale, age 11,
Falmouth Schools



We were supposed to arrive at 0330 but must have been later as it was nearing daylight and things were quite visible. The others that arrived before were the Rangers and the Glide Corp.

We were transferred onto LCMs which were carrying about a ton of explosives and all the needed detonators. All our moves had to be done with hand signals and complete silence. The Germans, who had expected us, were waiting in “pill boxes” about a thousand yards away.

It was now time to protect each other’s back, do our job and to hopefully make it out alive.

Our task force entered France at the “red” sector of Omaha Beach on Normandy shores. There was a 2 lane path up the side of a hundred foot hill. The Germans, at times, were so close that we could hear them talking and laughing as they were dug in waiting for the “kill.” Before our forces were on shallow ground we were totally discovered by the enemy. The Germans began hitting us with rifle fire, machine guns and their deadly 88's--one shot went high, one low and the third usually would hit its target.

There were terrific explosions from everywhere, from the front and the back--from everywhere. All the fire came from our ships, ground forces and from the enemy. Just deafening destruction everywhere, just too horrible. On the way over I saw many men on their knees, praying.

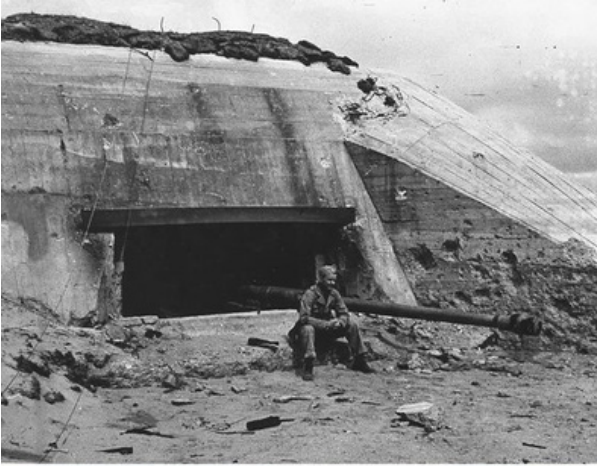
The sea water was literally red with blood. Scores of our forces were blown apart and many body parts were floating ashore. The loss of life was simply staggering and there were many drowned under the weight of their heavy packs which pulled them under.



The onslaught of ships, troops, bombers and fighter planes converging in about a one mile stretch was staggering. It indeed was an ugly event which seemed that the whole world was mad and blowing up. We didn't have the luxury or time to be scared. My shaking came later and certainly not because of being cold.

Our laborious hard work was to blow up the steel obstacles that the Germans had placed just under the surface of the water for the sole purpose of sinking our amphibious ships that were coming ashore. We also had to blow up wrecked ships, boats and other debris.

This was done with plastic explosives (TNT). This material looked and felt like window putty and was shaped by hand so that any object could be imploded or exploded. The work was long, hard, hot--no glorious glamour here.



After many hours of carnage (eternity) the beachhead had become secured, the important German bunkers had been secured and their “Atlantic Wall” had been smashed.

The price on both sides had become quite evident; there were scores that lay dead on the shore. There were so many in fact that machines had to make emergency ditches to bury them as they were hampering the operation to get tanks, trucks, etc. ashore.

When our work was completed on the beach, those that I went over with, that did survive, were homeless. We had to find our own food and shelter for several days. All our belongings had been sunk with an LST. We had no protection from the weather and were exposed to drenching rains. Our k-rations were given to us by the Army--beg, borrow and steal.

As the immediate front moved back about two miles, our work to clear the water and the shore had to continue along with being wary of possible snipers, many, many hours a day.

Now for a little bit of embarrassing humor, and I was the “goat.” One night I had the watch for any incoming German planes or rockets. I saw a bright light, a fireball in the sky, and so I put out the alert that a “buzzbomb” was coming in. The whole sky lit up with tracer bullets. My quick judgement was very wrong as I had reported a bright star that through the hazy atmosphere made it appear like it was moving.

We were given a ten day rest leave and were flown to London in an Army C-4. The hotel we stayed at, off Trafalgar Square, was blown apart while we were there. During an air raid a German buzzbomb blew half of it off. We were lucky to be in the good half.

I returned to Normandy by C-47 to the same old routine. The road over which more than a million men had passed was so muddy and deep with ruts that the equipment would often get stuck. I have seen many men pull a truck up with ropes.

A week later we were transferred to Cherbourg, France to assist in more demolition.



[D-Day] is a memory you never forget. Even at this time in my life [over fifty years later] I do often dream about it.