

# AN OLD INFANTRYMAN'S STORY

TOM ROZMAN

It was late Sunday afternoon in Navy quarters at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot's housing area in Hingham, MA. A 12-year-old boy was watching the popular TV series *Victory at Sea*. The footage was showing Infantrymen — heavily loaded with their weapons, ammunition, and personal gear — working their way over the assault troop ship's rail, down nets along the side of the ship into smaller LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel), which were bobbing in the sea some 40 feet below and banging into the side of the ship in the swells. The load the Infantrymen were carrying seemed too much for the obviously hazardous climb down the wet netting.

The boy's family had enjoyed its normal Sunday routine. After attending mass at St. Paul's Catholic Church in town and visiting the general store across from the church, the family had taken a ride along the south shore coast to Scituate. As

evening came on back at the family's quarters, the boy's father, an active Army Infantry major at the time, was catching up on some household work missed because of being on duty with the National Guard unit he was advising the day before. The family's only black and white TV was located in the living room, and the boy's father was finishing a task in the adjacent dining area in the small duplex quarters.

As the boy watched the Infantrymen on the screen, the expressions on the young Soldiers' faces made an impression — the faces seemed pensive, concentrating on what they were doing but somehow in a way preoccupied. No face was smiling.

From the few comments the boy had heard from other family members about World War II and his father's experience in the war, he knew that his father had made several amphibious combat assaults in the South Pacific Theater. His father did not talk about his experiences.

It occurred to the boy that the Soldiers' climb down the nets wasn't like a ride at the local amusement park's roller coaster — an exciting thrill with a sense that after the ride life would go back to normal. Even at 12, the thought occurred that those Soldiers were carrying huge loads down a wet slippery net and if one of them lost his grip on the netting, the fall would be swift and the Soldier would either crash into the floor of the LCVP, hit the top of its gunnel with likely injury, or worse, fall into the water. In the latter case, the weight of the equipment would pull the Soldier down, most likely drowning him. As badly, the LCVP in a swell would create an opening for the Soldier to drop into and then slide back toward the ship, crushing the Soldier against the side of the ship.

As the boats completed their loading, they moved away from the side of the attack transport and began to move through the swells, the packed Infantrymen lurching in the bays. The boats eventually arrived at a rendezvous point with the other boats where they then circled until receiving a signal to form into a wave and start toward the beach. As the boats achieved speed, came on line, and broke for the beach, the Infantrymen were buffeted against each other as the boats

*U.S. troops go over the side of a Coast Guard-manned combat transport to enter the landing barges at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville, as the invasion gets under way in November 1943.*

Photo courtesy of National Archives



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made way through the swells. Some of the coverage showed boats being damaged and Soldiers being injured. Then the ramp went down, and some of the heavily loaded men went under water while others were in varying depths of surf. Yet, they rushed forward, forcing their way forward to the beach. Adding to the chaos, there were splashes of enemy fire, some striking the boats and Soldiers. This was real combat footage and the events were real.

Somehow even to a 12 year old, the footage went a little beyond exciting and a sense of human “mortality” crept into consciousness. But the singular impression was that the Soldiers went forward in each sequence of the action — even at his age the boy understood something about human fear, like getting on the high-dive platform at the pool. It then occurred to the boy that his father had experienced what he was seeing in the film clips and he thought to ask him what it was like.

At the time, the father was already an old Soldier. He had 18 years of service, having enlisted in the Connecticut National Guard in the fall of 1939 after a stint in the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was mobilized with his unit for active federal service in February 1941 and served in a combat rifle company in combat as a staff sergeant, technical sergeant, and first sergeant. Most of his career as a technical sergeant was spent serving as a rifle platoon leader due to a shortage of second lieutenants.

Ultimately on Luzon, he was commissioned and continued serving for several months in combat operations as a rifle platoon leader before taking some leave and then rejoining his regiment and division for the coming invasion of the Japanese home islands. The Japanese government capitulated before what would have been his scheduled sixth combat amphibious assault. He subsequently continued his career in the Army until he retired as a lieutenant colonel following an assignment in a command billet in U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) in 1965.

At the time he shared his thoughts about amphibious combat assaults, he had just returned from a year in Vietnam. Over his 26 years of service, he served 16 of those years assigned to battalions, a battle group, and a headquarters of the 30th, 39th and 169th Infantry Regiments, units assigned to the 3rd, 9th, and 43rd Infantry Divisions. He commanded four infantry line and battalion headquarters companies, two which deployed to Europe, as well as served on battalion, battle group, and regimental staff. He spent almost another year commanding a fifth company — Service Battery, 67th Armored Artillery Battalion, Division Artillery, 3rd Armored Division. Upon promotion to major, he served as the S4 of a training regiment. There would be other assignments to the U.S. Army Armored Center; Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam; 1st Army at Fort Devens, MA, as an advisor to the Massachusetts Army National Guard; and finally USAREUR, his second tour of duty in Germany. He served another eight years from that Sunday night to include another tour of duty in Germany — 12 years of overseas duty in Germany, the South Pacific, and Vietnam.

Other family members had served in the Infantry as well.

One great uncle on the boy’s mother’s side — a corporal in Company K, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Division — had been killed in action at Belleau Wood on 6 June 1918. Another uncle had served as an infantry sergeant in the 262nd Infantry, 66th Infantry Division. One of his father’s brothers, all six of whom served in the Army (as did the boy’s mother’s four brothers), was a combat rifleman in the 313th Infantry, 79th Infantry Division. A younger brother would serve in the 169th Infantry in the late 1940s, and another uncle (a WWII Navy veteran) served as a lieutenant in the 110th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division during the same period.

Two other uncles had participated in assault landings during the war. Another had served as an artilleryman with the 1st Infantry Division and made all of its assault landings during WWII. Another uncle served in a tank battalion with the 77th Infantry Division, participating in the landings in the Pacific made by that unit. But none of these family members had shared very much about their experiences. If anything came out about the war experiences at family gatherings, which hardly ever happened, it tended to be positive or humorous — and what did a child pay attention to anyway? Certainly not what the adults were talking about.

But on this Sunday, the images and the faces of the young Soldiers in the film clips appearing on TV spoke a language even a 12-year-old boy could get a sense of — enough to ask his father what it was like. His father had been in and out of the room while finishing up what he was doing and had caught glimpses of the footage and some of the commentary. So the boy’s question when he asked it did not come completely out of the blue. The father stopped what he was doing; there was a pause and he didn’t seem to want to answer. He seemed to be going back in time... remembering, but trying to decide what could be shared with a 12 year old. How should it be shared?

Finally he spoke. He said, “You were so scared you didn’t think your knees would work; they felt like water as you started to climb down the netting — but you did what you were trained to do. Anyone who says he’s not scared is not telling the truth. In the boat, there was so much noise you couldn’t talk, barely think, even shout and be heard, and you felt like you were going to throw up — but you did what you trained to do. When the ramp went down, the training took over. You ran forward with your weapon ready into the water and onto the beach — doing what you trained to do. Your friends went down, and the enemy fire came at you. You were mad about what was happening, then anger took over — it took hold and you moved ahead, assaulting positions, doing what had to be done until the initial objectives were taken. You secured your position and when the action finally stopped, your body would shake. You would cry, you couldn’t control it... then the training would take hold again and you would do what you trained to do...” The words stopped and he went back to his work.

The words did nothing to promote war or present it as anything romantic or glorious — just the unvarnished words of a combat Infantryman about what really happens in an amphibious assault. To the boy, his comments seemed very real given the footage he just viewed on the TV. Short and



*Under heavy machine-gun fire, Soldiers from the 1st Infantry Division exit a Coast Guard landing boat and head for shore during one of the first waves of assault landings on Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944.*

simple, the comments were not embellished and certainly not glorious. If there was any glory in them, it was that men faced down almost crippling personal fear, each in his own way, but still went forward — some to death and some who got the job done. But how did they do this?

When in uniform, the Infantryman that made the comment wore an arrowhead with four bronze stars on his Asiatic Pacific Theater Ribbon, a Combat Infantryman's Badge, a Bronze Star Medal, a Presidential and Philippine Presidential Unit Citation Ribbon — and a purple ribbon with white edges and three oak leaf clusters on it. Concerning the latter, some physical scars were visible like the “v” shaped scar in the center of his forehead, the scars around the end of his nose where the Army surgeon stitched it back on, the scars on the fingers of his right hand, and the scar at the base of his spine. Some, upon reflection in later years, were an indication of why the old Infantryman paused before he answered the question that Sunday so long ago.

The old Infantryman was a straight shooter. He didn't glorify any of his experience. But there was a quiet pride of accomplishment one could sense. There was a feeling that the Soldier felt a pride toward those who had faced the storm with him, a sense that they had weathered the storm over their own humanity and got the job done and come home. There was also a very personal unspoken sense of loss and remembrance for comrades who did not come home — a fellow sergeant who pulled him to cover after mortar shrapnel tore into his back and drove him to the ground during an assault on a hill. The sergeant who pulled him to safety was leaning over him when he had the back of his head taken

off by fragments, killing him instantly.

The old Infantryman had other stories in later years, but he never told any without prompting and often kept the story short and to the point. In retrospect, every word proved relevant and true as later experience would bear out.

The 12-year-old boy and his younger brother would eventually serve in the infantry in combat battalions of the 6th, 7th, 11th, 12th, 23rd, 38th, 46th, and 58th Infantry Regiments and the 12th Cavalry Regiment — four of these units were deployed overseas. His grandson would also serve in the infantry.

The boy never forgot the old Infantryman's story. If there is glory in combat, it is overcoming fear to get the mission done at least cost to the Soldiers you are responsible for — and training gets you over the fear and into the mission. It gets the mission accomplished. Hard training saves the lives of your Soldiers. It gets the job done, and it gets your comrades home.

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