**Memorial Day - May 28, 2018**

By Steve Besse

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. This is an honor and I appreciate it. I was asked to give you a brief report on my experience at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944 which was 73 years ago. I enlisted in the Navy one month after Pearl Harbor and was able to finish college at Oregon State under a V-7 program. As soon as I graduated I went to Columbia University where I received my commission.

After receive my commission as an ensign, my first tour of duty was two months of training with the Amphibious Forces off the coast of Maryland. I was then ordered to Boston to put a ship in commission, the LCI 420. I was assigned as the Executive Officer. LCI means Landing Craft Infantry. It is a small ship, flat bottomed, and 156 feet long. It carries a crew of 24 men and 4 officers. We

had sleeping quarters for 200 personnel if and when necessary. We had ramps on each side of the ship enabling us to discharge soldiers directly on to a beach. After putting our ship in commission, we trained along the Atlantic coast for two months and then sailed for England in a 105 ship convoy. We sailed at only 9 knots taking us nearly three weeks to cross the Atlantic. An LCI doesn't go through the waves, it goes up and over every wave with many sailors seasick much of the time. On arriving in England, we underwent further training on the Southern Coast. On June 4th, 1944, we loaded up with 200 soldiers in preparation for the invasion of France. Due to bad weather the invasion was delayed one day and we sailed for France the next night arriving off of Omaha Beach on Normandy the morning of June 6th. A battleship and destroyers were bombarding the beach. In our group of ships, there were five LCI's. Our mission was to deliver the 200 soldiers on to the beach. As we approached the beach one of our LCIs hit a mine and was destroyed. We could not make a dry beaching as the tide was out and soldiers would need to unload into the water nearly waste deep. One of our crew jumped into the water and planted a guide line on the beach to help the soldiers with their heavy equipment make it ashore. Heavy firing from German artillery was going on constantly and many of the troops we unloaded didn't make it far up the beach. Two of our sister LCI's were hit and destroyed by German 88 cannons and one LCI broached on the beach. Ours was the only one that got off the beach safely.

To protect our ship as well as other ships, we had a big barrage balloon tied to the fantail of the ship. This balloon was about a hundred feet in the air and prevented German aircraft from found strafing us. In theory, this was a great idea as it kept German Messerschmidts from zeroing in on us. In actuality, it was terrible. The German batteries with their 88 cannons were just over the hill and could not see our ship but they could easily see our balloon so were able to zero in on the balloon. One 88 shell burst on the starboard side of the ship, the next one hit on the port side and we knew where the next one would land. We were just coming off the beach and kicked the ship into flank speed. As we pulled away from the beach, the cable holding the balloon swung back a bit and the German 88 hit right where we had been and blew the balloon off the fantail. It was a very narrow escape. We were extremely fortunate with only one casualty. My bosun's mate was seriously injured by shrapnel. I was hit in the head and knocked to the deck but the shrapnel didn't penetrate my helmet.

Having unloaded our first group of soldiers we sailed out into the English Channel about 10 miles where large troop transports loaded with soldiers were anchored. We pulled up alongside a transport and 200 soldiers climbed down ladders to get aboard our ship. We then headed back into Omaha Beach where we were able to make a dry beaching as the tide was now in. We unloaded the troops again under heavy fire. We did this two or three more times, back and forth from the transports to the beach still under heavy fire. By then it was getting dark. As we were approaching the beach on one beaching, I went below deck to tell my army captain in charge of the troops that we would hit the beach in about 5 minutes. The Captain asked me, "Is it raining outside? I can hear it hitting the deck." I told him, "Sorry that isn't rain, that's shrapnel!"

After successfully getting off the beach that time, we were given a special assignment. Two tug boats had just been sunk. Our ship together with another LCI was ordered to serve as a tug and tie up to a barge loaded with one thousand tons of open ammunition and beach it on Omaha Beach. As we approached the Beach with the barge in tow, all Hell broke loose. The sky was ablaze with horrendous fire. It was like a hundred 4th of Julys with tracers flying every which way. Fireworks have never held a thrill for me since. We did, however, successfully push the barge up on the beach without getting blown up. Instead of untying the lines to the barge we cut them with an axe so we could get away more quickly.

We then went back to taking troops from transports to the beach. Back out ten miles from the beach, where we were alongside one of the transports, an incident happened that I shall never forget. Troops were climbing down rope ladders onto our ship. I was checking our ramps prior to the next breaching. We were tied up right next to this big transport and just opposite the ramp I was checking was a big porthole. It was the galley. Standing there was a ship's cook slicing off pieces of roast beef from a great big roast. We had been on K rations for several days. I looked at that roast beef and just drooled. The cook said to me, "You all like a roast beef sandwich?" I said "Would I". He not only gave me a sandwich but he made a roast beef sandwich for every man in my crew!!! To this day, I can still taste that sandwich.

After another day, we sailed back across the Channel to England with some wounded and returned two days later with a load of army nurses. There were about 85 nurses. When we arrived at Omaha Beach the weather was such that we could not make a safe beaching to discharge the nurses. We had to anchor off the beach for the night and then took the nurses into the beach the next morning. You can guess what that night off the beach was like aboard our ship with 85 excited nurses and 24 lonesome sailors. The war didn't look so bad after all.