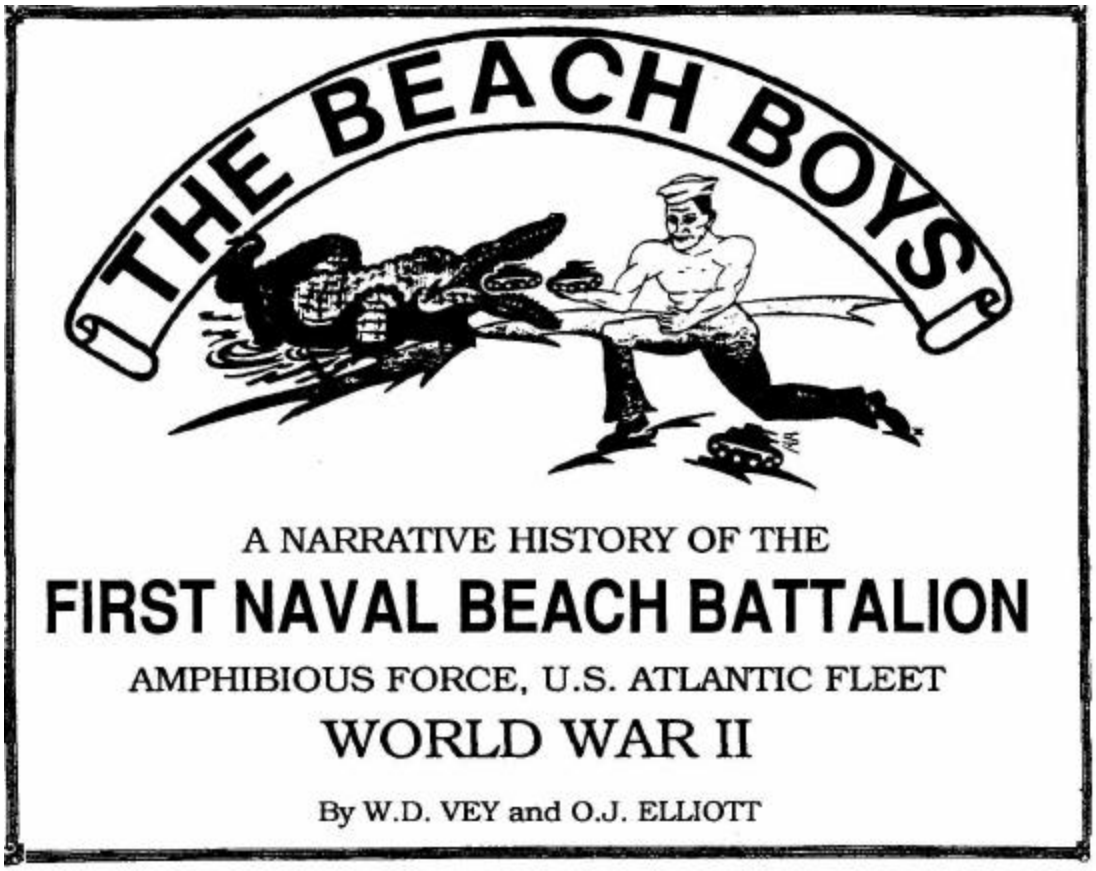

A NARRATIVE HISTORY OF THE

FIRST NAVAL BEACH BATTALION

AMPHIBIOUS FORCE, U.S. ATLANTIC FLEET

WORLD WAR II

By W.D. VEY and O.J. ELLIOTT

With an addendum by R.B. White
February –March 2001

FOREWORD

The following is a shortened and very slightly edited version of an unpublished book, entitled *The Beach Boys*, a narrative history of The First Naval Beach Battalion, a part of the Amphibious Force, U. S. Atlantic Fleet during World War Two. It was written by W. D. Vey and O. J. Elliot, and I obtained it from the Naval Historical Center in Washington, DC. I have omitted the illustrations; since in every case they were copies of copies, and I felt that for this reason they detracted from the book, rather than that they provided significant information. I expect to write a short introduction, and I've tentatively decided to finish with an addendum, describing, I hope, my sometimes - different recollection of events. I have no reason to try to refute any portion of the original book; but I was not always in the same spot as the two authors, and saw some things that they didn't.

My interest in the history was rekindled during a trip to Fort Pierce, Florida in 1997. We found the location of the Amphibious Training Base, (see Fig. 1 in the addendum) and The St. Lucie Historical Society Museum, where a monument dedicated to the men who served at the base in WW II had been erected. See Fig. 2 in the addendum. Figs. 3 and 4 are the Radiomen and Signalmen of our platoon, in camp at Fort Pierce. Please note how fierce and determined we all look. If these pictures had fallen into enemy hands, doubtless they would have sued for peace earlier than they did. A museum dedicated to the Navy SEAL teams is situated at the other end of the island. We visited both museums, and what I learned seems to clearly indicate that the SEAL teams grew from our efforts during WW II. I also learned that by war's end there had been fourteen Beach Battalions, but there was literally no mention of the First. I contacted a local man, who had commanded one of the later Battalions, and who had donated most of what scant information on Beach Battalions the county museum had. From the Navy Department in Washington I obtained the unpublished manuscript, and contacted the primary author, who was a retired Marine Corps Major. Of course, on finding that the history had been written by a marine I immediately became suspicious; all Navy men know that marines are glory hounds, and to the best of my knowledge we had no assistance from the Marines. It turned out that Major Vey was a Navy enlisted man (Yeoman 2/c) during the war, and that he did not join the USMC until after the war was over. He stayed in the Marines, served in Korea and Viet Nam, and retired as a Major.

THE BEACH BOYS

By W. D. Vey and O. J. Elliott

INTRODUCTION

My purpose in compiling this history is twofold: first, to provide the surviving members of the battalion with a semi-documented history of their battle actions in WW II; and secondly, to place in the official archives of the United States Navy, a record of this, the granddaddy of all Beach Battalions, Atlantic and Pacific.

Insofar as it is possible to ascertain, there exists today virtually no record of the battalion and its accomplishments. Reference is made to its existence in different publications dealing with amphibious operations in the European theatre, but apparently no comprehensive documentation exists which acknowledges even the existence of our battalion, let alone any that lays down in black and white a record of its accomplishments during our participation in five major amphibious assaults on the beaches of the European-African-Mediterranean theatre.

The reason for this lack of documentation is unknown, and will in all probability remain so, although one possible explanation may be that in the rapid de-commissioning of the battalion in the little Mediterranean town of Arzew at the completion of our fifth amphibious assault, many documents that should have been saved were burned or destroyed in the shredder. It is possible that a record does exist somewhere, hidden under a "Task Force Designator", rather than under the official battalion name. Whatever the reason, the "non-existence" of the battalion in the official naval archives remains an unacceptable situation for those of us who have survived. For this reason, if for no other, we are determined that there shall indeed be a record of the First Naval Beach Battalion, revered by each of us, and documented to the best of our ability for all posterity.

Beach Battalions were a product of World War II. After Dunkirk, Crete and Corregidor, when it was determined that territory lost to the enemy could be regained only by storming the coasts of Europe and Africa, and the island beaches of the Pacific, concepts of modern warfare changed dramatically. High level planners concluded that they could put assault troops ashore from ships and planes, and that, landed in sufficient force, the infantry could fight its way inland. To stay there however, the infantry had to be supplied with food, weapons, clothing, ammunition, artillery, and tank support. Someone had to control the gigantic flow of material across the beaches while and after they had been assaulted, and to that end the concept of Naval Beach Battalions was born. Shore Parties were nothing new to the Navy. They had been around for years. Most were composed of members of the ship's company, picked to go ashore to put down revolts, fight fires, give aid in time of disaster, etc., but, during a conflict such as the sea-to-land assaults of World War I, ship's captains simply could not spare men from the crew for such duties.

Accordingly, separate organizations, skilled in jobs related to amphibious warfare, were needed. And so, the Naval Beach Battalions were conceived and born, and so, specifically, was the First Naval Beach Battalion which still, 50 years later, generates a feeling of pride that brings us together annually to renew and share that feeling which remains strong in all of us who were there.

Records and documentation pertaining to the initial formation and organization of the battalion are few and far between. The North African invasion task forces for Morocco on the Atlantic and Algeria in the Mediterranean included "beach parties" added to ship's companies for the purpose of the early concept of combined navy-army beach parties. Some embarked from England, others from our east coast ports. The successful conclusion of these landings saw most of the troop transports brought back to the states for better re-fitting as assault transports. The officers and men of the newly created beach parties were detached and sent to various amphibious assembly pools to await assignment to the many branches of the rapidly expanding amphibious forces. From this witches cauldron of "veterans" of the African landings, and many newly allocated men and officers from all over the United States, the Beach Battalion, the FIRST NAVAL BEACH BATTALION, grew like Topsy from pieces of paper to a unit of three companies, nine platoons, and a headquarters group, a total of approximately 450 newly introduced strangers. As noted above, records and documentation of this helter-skelter transfer of so many men and officers into a newly formed unit remain obscure, very obscure.

It is entirely possible that records and documentation pertaining to the initial formation and organization of the battalion exist only in the few examples attached to this work as appendices. It is known, however, that initially and for the North African invasion, the units assigned to assault transports and which subsequently formed the nucleus of the battalion were officially known as "Beach Parties". The actual commissioning of the re-formed group as the First Naval Beach Battalion" took place in the Naval Base area of Norfolk, Virginia, which now included rapidly expanding amphibious facilities at Ocean View, Little Creek, and Camp Bradford.

Subsequent to, and to some extent during the North African landings, sailors ordered to Beach Battalion duty were normally assigned to one of four duty classifications; communications, hydrographics, boat repair, or medical. When a beach battalion went into action, it was organized along the lines of an Army battalion - three companies, with each company divided into three platoons whose interlocking duties embraced every phase of the battalion's task. Company and Battalion Headquarters personnel, as noted, brought the battalion, at full strength, to 450 officers and men.

Headed by a Beachmaster and his Assistant, each platoon of a Beach Battalion was assigned signalmen, radiomen, medical personnel, hydrographic specialists, and boat repair experts. In a typical beach assault, the personnel of the beach battalion went ashore in one or more of the first three or four assault waves, scattering their equipment over the beach so that a single bomb or artillery shell would not destroy

all of it. Digging their own slit trenches and foxholes on the beach, the men prepared as best they could for possible enemy counterattack while still setting up the beach as a simulated port for the onslaught of supplies, equipment and men soon to be landed in support of the initial assault troops already headed inland to their assigned objectives.

Scheduled to be the first into action during a beach assault were the medical personnel, administering to assault troops cut down during the first waves, and evacuating casualties to naval ships lying to off the beaches. Emergency treatment was given, and a casualty section was augmented by hydrographic and boat repair personnel pressed into service as stretcher-bearers. Meanwhile, the Beachmaster and the men trained in hydrographic duties were locating the various beach sites, surveying the approaches and beach exits, locating and charting underwater obstacles, and determining the best passages for the armada of landing craft soon to come. Enemy gunfire and strafing runs were usually ignored in the early stages of beach operation. There was no place to go. Navy underwater demolition teams and army engineering personnel were called in when required to clear approach lanes and to blow beach and underwater obstacles. Boat repairmen, when released from stretcher-bearing duties, turned their attention to the problem of landing craft that had been damaged or broached in landing, in an attempt to get them back into service and returned to their parent ships.

Beach communications often decided the turn of a battle, and so the communications elements of the Beach Battalion were rapidly deployed and established, (normally in the first assault wave), to link the Beachmaster up with the fleet and the assault troops. Radios, signal lights, and the gyrating arms of battalion signalmen were put to immediate and effective use in the establishment of the overall beach operations.

From their own experiences, the men of the First Beach Battalion can tell you that there is no such thing as a perfect beach operation. Something always goes wrong. At Port Lyautey and Fedala on the North African Atlantic approaches, the gigantic pounding surf crumpled landing craft into tangles of twisted wood and metal; at Sicily, the combination of great swells and beaches poorly suited for landing craft, tossed landing craft around like corks, dumping them on the beaches like pieces of driftwood. At Salerno, the obstacles were the massed German Tiger Tanks with their dreaded 88mm cannon, picking off approaching landing craft like ducks in a shooting gallery. The condition of the British vehicles, fresh from Montgomery's desert campaign against the German forces under Rommel, required all the equipment and skill of the battalion’s drivers and mechanics to drag them off the beaches to make room for the following landing craft and their loads. At Anzio, after a surprisingly unopposed landing, the failure of the Army brass to take advantage of the German's occupation elsewhere created a siege condition on the beaches that lasted for more than four months, during which time the Beach Battalion and Army Shore Party Engineers were at the mercy of the pounding of the German artillery in the mountains behind the beach guarding the approaches to Rome. This included the

famous "Anzio Annie" cannon mounted on rails, which provided an almost impregnable hiding place into a mountain tunnel between firing runs. Finally, the landing described as "nearly perfect" by the "big brass", the invasion of Southern France. A few booby-trapped pine trees along the beaches, the usual nut-crusher mines in the sand, and a rather skimpy collection of underwater concrete tetrahedrons failed to deter the invasion forces even temporarily. If any of our overseas operations could be tagged as such, Southern France, our fifth and final landing, was a "piece of cake". By and large, though, there was always something to cause part of the carefully laid plans and timing to be discarded. Our battalion personnel took a back seat to no one in this operational area. To some of the more ingenious members of the battalion it was fun.

But the landings were made and the beachheads established because the men of the "Immortal First" refused to accept temporary setbacks or defeat. When the first wave roared ashore and the boat ramps dropped our battalion was there. And got the job done. Not always according to the book. But done and done well.

The development of the First Naval Beach Battalion from an untried group of quickly formed experimental beach parties in 1942, to the crack unit that stormed the beaches of Southern France in 1944 in what has been described as the most nearly perfect amphibious operation of the entire war, perfectly illustrates the metamorphosis from beach parties into naval beach battalions. The FIRST was "first". For a long time it was unique. It set the style and standards for those that followed. The trials and tribulations and the exploits and accomplishments of the officers and men of the First Naval Beach Battalion are briefly touched on in the ensuing chapters of this short history.

Perhaps in the millennium to come, some young Galactic sailor, bored as we were with the interminable length of his voyages, will press the button on his star ship that will bring onto his view screen this, The History of the Immortal USN First Naval Beach Battalion.

IN THE BEGINNING - NORTH AFRICA

Picture, if you can, a contingent of United States Naval personnel, outfitted in a mixture of Army, Navy and Marine Corps uniforms, commanded by a United States Coast Guard officer, and acting for all the world like a stevedore crew from the docks of New York, and you can see in your mind's eye a picture of the Beach Party, the forerunners of the Beach Battalion. From a nucleus of nine of the best of these beach parties, the First Naval Beach Battalion was formed and subsequently took part in the assaults on four more enemy shores after the African landings.

The organization and training of each of these individual beach party units was hurried, disorganized, and in every aspect, minimal. Sent to an area known as Little Creek, Virginia, the officers and men were assembled and lodged in pyramidal tents in the swampy bog, across the creek from a spic and span US Coast Guard Section Base, to learn invasion tactics with no "book" from which to learn. Morale was understandably low. Officers were as much in the dark as the men and could provide no answers to many legitimate questions raised every day by the men in their charge. I think the fact that we were all up the same creek, literally as well as figuratively, was the embryo from which our later First Beach Battalion feelings of pride and achievement were born. Assembled in late August and September of 1942, divided into nine groups of 43 men and 3 officers, including one medical officer, we were on our assigned ships and off to the shooting war in early October. Up the rebels.

It has always been somewhat questionable whether or not the “real Navy" ever laid claim to this "bastard" outfit. But that was in the beginning. What was the job of this strange looking group of half-outfitted men who had come aboard their ships? (We might well have felt better about the whole thing if we had known how untrained for combat and insecure the crews of these makeshift attack transports were) What job had been assigned to this strange group? What operational orders did they bring aboard? Were they "commandos?” Nah. Were they attached for temporary duty of some unknown description or were they newly assigned to the ship's company as permanent residents? With those rag-tag outfits from Army, Navy and Marine Corps, and those Springfield rifles still rank and sticky from cold storage in solid grease bags since turned in after World War I, we undoubtedly did provoke discussion as we straggled aboard ship. Fortunately we had balked at accepting those little round WW I helmets, and could come aboard looking OK if viewed from the upper decks. Finally, were we soldiers, sailors, or marines? Answers to such questions were hazy or nonexistent in 1942. Most are still unclear today, 50 years later. Suffice it to say then, that from this inauspicious beginning, evolved the battle tested crack amphibious support unit which was later to be commissioned as the USN FIRST NAVAL BEACH BATTALION the first ever in the annals of naval history.

The men of the fledgling beach parties began reporting to Little Creek, Virginia in late August and September 1942, "for duty in connection with amphibious operations, (beach party training)". No battle-tested veterans these. This was a nucleus of doctors, lawyers, salesmen, mechanics, educators, football players, stevedores, farmers, clerks, etc., etc. No women; this was 1942. You name it and the profession was represented in the ranks of these fledgling beach parties. Some prior military presence could be felt in the form of personnel who had previously served in the military - a few back to World War I, but generally speaking, the bulk of the new units were plain, ordinary citizens from all walks of life who had been drafted or who had volunteered for naval service to end the war in which the United States was now a full fledged partner.

Typical of the type and length of training required for the new beach party personnel were the orders given to Lieutenant (jg) Jack Elliott, (later to become Executive Officer of the battalion). Lieutenant Elliott received orders, after six weeks in training with 800 other "30 day wonders" at Harvard University, officially known as the "Officers Training School", on 28 August, 1942, to report to the Commander, Amphibious Forces, Atlantic Fleet, Norfolk, Virginia. He reported, as directed, on 31 August 1942, and was transferred on 7 September to the Commanding Officer, Amphibious Force Training base, Little Creek, Virginia, for duty in connection with amphibious operations, (beach party training). A scant three weeks later, on 29 September, Lt (jg) Elliott was ordered to "take charge of Ensign Julius C. Sleder and proceed to the Commanding Officer, 36th Army Engineer Regiment, Camp Bradford, Virginia, for duty as assigned, and for further transfer to the USS Susan B. Anthony". Ten days later, Lt (jg) Elliott reported to the Commanding Officer of the Susan B. Anthony, formerly one of the Grace Line combination banana/passenger ships pressed into service for the speeded-up invasion plans agreed to by the allied forces to appease Stalin's demand for a "Second Front". The conversion of this ship to a ship to take part in an invasion in enemy territorial waters and beaches was almost ludicrous. The mahogany staircases and other areas in which the original wood fittings created a terrible firetrap remained intact for this invasion because there was no time for such work. Lieutenant Elliott reports that a soda fountain in the former ship's lounge area was still intact and working. Lifeboat davits had been strengthened and the boats replaced by some of the earliest of the Higgins Landing Craft. That was it. Off to war. Rub-a-dub-dub. Lieutenant Elliott's amphibious training ended with his reporting on board. From now on, he and Ensign Sleder and the 43 men assigned to him, would learn the hard facts of landings, air attacks, and warfare in general from their own improvised actions. They were trained naval warriors.

From the hallowed halls of Harvard on 28 August 1942 to the decks of the Susan B. Anthony attack transport on 9 October 1942, a total time span of approximately five weeks, this young civilian/officer, along with all the other officers in this first invasion, had received all the training they were going to get prior to embarkation for the amphibious assault on the beaches of North Africa. To make matters worse, as

excerpted from the personal notes of Lieutenant Elliott, it appears that the only knowledge, the only tactical or operational orders ever seen by members of this brand-new baby beach party came in the form of a release to the entire ship's company after their leaving port for the invasion. "These orders were for the Anthony's boat crews...the beach party had to borrow copies and play their part in the invasion by ear ... no help was offered by the ship's company", wrote Elliott. "The Niagara Falls surf that first day, and our evacuation that night to an empty ocean with all ships gone - moved to another area because of a German submarine attack which got four of the transports only partially unloaded - was a combination of a very good small boat officer and crew, and a goodly measure of pure blind luck."

With the above as the only available information on the initial organization, training, and embarkation of the naval beach parties assigned to the landings in North Africa, we shall proceed to document, insofar as possible, the subsequent movements of the beach party groups.

Specific numbers of Naval Beach Party personnel involved in the African landings are not available, but we do have documents indicating that the beach parties, organized into the previously described 43 men and three officers, were assigned as temporary ship's company to a variety of naval vessels, primarily those converted from civilian use to troop and attack transports, with names such as the Susan B. Anthony, the Joseph Hewes, Tasker H. Bliss, Edward Rutledge, Hugh L. Scott, and others. The names I have given you, except for the Anthony, which was lost in the cross-channel invasion of 1944, remain fixed in our memories as they all shared a common fate - they were torpedoed and sunk off the coast of French Morocco and the Mediterranean coast of Algiers during these early amphibious operations in November 1942.

From limited documentation and personal recollections of the members of the participating beach party units, it appears that the invasion fleet embarked from ports all along the Atlantic Coast - Boston, Newport, Rhode Island, New York, Norfolk, and Jacksonville, meeting to create in mid-Atlantic, the giant armada that was to effect the first major military operation by amphibious forces of WW II. Some of the beach party units trained in the Norfolk area were sent to England and embarked from there for the invasion targeted for Algeria, in and around Oran and Algiers. But the bulk of the beach party units that were later to be formed into the First Beach Battalion were those trained at Little Creek and Camp Bradford, and embarked from points in the Hampton Roads area.

Generally speaking, the invasion fleet had a relatively quiet voyage. The expected U-boat sightings were few and far between. As with all troop movements, by land or by sea, day followed day in monotonous sequence with little but "chow", "calisthenics",

and the inevitable wild crap games to break the routine. I think most of us were anxious for the landings to start to see if our expectations and fears were correct or exaggerated. Few had ever been in any form of combat and the adrenalin was flowing in gradually mounting waves as the November 8 D-Day inevitably drew closer.

Finally it was here. Suddenly, after dark on the night of November *7*, the anchors were dropped, total blackout was enforced for the first time, and the deathly silence after blowers and other machine noises were stopped made us realize that our time to enter the war had come. Around midnight, each of the transports began to prepare for the landing. Cargo nets were slung over the sides of the ships, the landing craft were off-loaded, empty except for the boat crews (the jerry-rigged replacement davits had not been sufficiently tested to warrant entrusting the boats to be loaded with personnel at deck level and then lowered into the sea), and the signaling flashlights started to signal the beginning of the scariest part of any preparation for landing. The climbing over a ship's rail in inky darkness, groping with one foot for a piece of the cargo net, carefully finding a hand hold on the net, hopefully two, and then the start down the net, "rung by rung", trying to avoid, by feel, stepping on the hands of the man below you, hoping that the man above you would also be so kind, realizing, as the net swung out from the ship as it rolled in the tremendous swell, nearer to that part of the African coast, that it was going to swing back in the same pendulum action to smash you and your hands against the rusted, barnacle-encrusted steel side of the ship, hoping as it happened that you wouldn't flinch and cause you to loosen your grip, realizing also that as you swung out from the ship on the outward roll that your weight would probably drop you through the bottom of the landing craft presumed to be down there somewhere in the blackness, with all the guns and ammunition, back packs, and food and water tied to your body one place or another, listening to the cursing and muffled shouts from the boat crew to "get the hell down here, we're in a hurry". Finally it was over. You had dropped when you could make out the outlines of the landing craft, and, being one of the first over the side, you had fallen into a relatively empty boat, and hadn't squashed any of the beach party under your combat-loaded hulk. You were in a landing craft which, when loaded, would circle with others for an hour or two until enough had been off-loaded to form a line abreast and head for the beach, shepherded by a minesweeper or other shallow-draft ship.

Suddenly, for this particular time of year and segment of the Atlantic Coast of North Africa, you realized that you were embarked in, (on), a veritable bucking-bronco making like a latter-day Maid of the Mist. The surf was reported to be totally unbelievable. Only a small number of troops of the Third Infantry Division were landed on the beach that day. About dark a landing craft was sent in from the Anthony to evacuate their beach party. As Lt (jg) Elliott has noted, removal of the men from this beach in that unbelievable surf was an example of what a good boat officer and crew could do if trained to handle the worst of small boat conditions. That boat crew was a credit to any amphibious operation. The fact that the transports

had evacuated their unloading area because of the U-boat attacks, leaving the boat crew with it's beach party cargo to wander about the coast of North Africa in a drizzling rain and mist, added to the unreal nature of our first enemy contested action. The Anthony's Beach Party, and all the others, was now "blooded".

Naval beach parties were landed at various points from Port Lyautey/Fedala in the East to Safi in the West. There were three main assault areas — Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers. Each of these was assigned three landings. The nine attack points took place along a succession of beaches covering a front of over 200 miles. General Patton, in the Casablanca assault area, had the largest body of troops, estimated to be 35,000, spaced out over the 200-mile front.

Allied Command had decided that because of the political situation in which Vichy still held control over the naval forces, it would be foolish to storm the ports themselves and face the naval defenses protecting them. The result was the dispersal into landings, nine in all on the entire front, to outflank the ports, and permit the development of an encircling pattern.

So much for theory and planning. All along this Atlantic Coast the Allied Command had been warned of the surf and tide conditions that made any attempt to send troops and equipment ashore extremely hazardous. A French pilot, familiar with these conditions was brought to the United States to describe and plot the hazards. His final advice was that it would be possible to land on these open, unprotected beaches a maximum of three days a month. What the Allied Command apparently overlooked — they were "green" too — was "what three days?" The rapidly rising and falling tide in the small river connecting Fedala and the airport at Port Lyautey, estimated at eleven feet, and the crashing combers along the coastal areas north and south of the Port Lyautey river approach created a combined hazard that wrecked many of our landing craft and caused the drowning deaths of an inordinate number of troops. Many of the incoming boats were in trouble and tossed around like scraps of wood before any beach party personnel could reach them. The loss of lives and cargo was hard to accept as something planned by the higher-ups. Finally, someone in authority started adding up the pluses and minuses and called a halt to the carnage. Beach parties were recalled to their ships and the invasion fleet was directed west to the undefended ports in and around Safi for dockside unloading. Why this decision was not reached long before it was, will remain locked in the files of the war's many fiascos.

(A tidbit of information gleaned by the author during the research for this landing indicated an even worse projection of landing days than that described by the French river pilot noted above. This additional information indicated that there is at the most a period of ELEVEN days during the entire year when the landing in the Fedala/Port

Lyautey area is physically possible. Monstrous tide movements, dropping or rising as much a 24 feet in a 15 minute time span are the norm.) The blooding of the beach parties which would subsequently be melded into our battalion was now advanced a giant notch. We had met the enemy, and we were on the way home with a fraction of the casualties we had been led to expect. We weren't cocky, but we were on our way to confidence that we could face up to many hazards that had heretofore seemed beyond our abilities.

Operation "TORCH", (as the North African invasion was designated), was successful, partially because it came as a complete surprise to the French forces in that area who were already in a confused situation related to loyalty to whom --the Vichy French or the pre-Vichy leadership. For a short period, the French forces reacted as might be expected -- they fought fiercely to defend their territory from an invader. The French Navy in particular, never gave up, and fought viciously to the end, which came on 11 November 1942 by which time it became obvious that the destruction of Casablanca and the ships of the French Fleet in its harbor would occur if a surrender was not negotiated. The peace treaty was signed that afternoon at Fedala, and General George Patton, Commander of U. S. Ground Forces, toasted the heroic dead of both countries and evidenced the wish that they now fight side by side to destroy the Nazis.

The 450 or so men of the beach parties in this operation, undergoing their initial trial by fire on the beaches of North Africa were numerically insignificant when compared to the estimated thirty-five thousand men which comprised the task force under General Patton's command, but their actions and accomplishments were in no way insignificant. It was in this major action, their first, with relatively light casualties, that the word 'immortal" was first whispered as befitting the beach parties. Four invasions later, when the Battalion was decommissioned, the casualties were still amazingly low in relation to landing on enemy beaches under the always awe-inspiring barrage of gunfire, bombing and strafing that characterized the first few days of an attack. Maybe there was something to the catchword "immortal". Somehow the references to the Battalion as the "Immortal First" gained popularity and has lived on to present times, at least in the hearts and minds of those "khaki sailors" who got their baptism of fire on the beaches and in the treacherous surf of the Atlantic Coast of North Africa.

Following a period of stevedore work on the various docks available for unloading, the ships containing the individual beach parties as temporary ship's company, returned to their points of embarkation. All but some radio and communications personnel were detached and ordered to temporary duty in and around the Hampton Roads area. As the men and officers returned from leave, most reported or were ordered to Oceanview, the new Headquarters of the Beach Battalion to be formed and commissioned as the USN First Naval Beach Battalion. Those granted "survivors leave" as a result of their ships having been torpedoed and sunk were the last to return to the fold. No parades or ticker tape welcomed them home, no citations

were awarded, no medals pinned, no words of praise. In all probability, few in the Hampton Roads naval complex even knew we existed, or had gone, and returned. But the men and officers of the individual beach parties, ordered to the assault transports, ordered to land on the enemy-held beaches, and ordered back home, and finally to the Nansemond Hotel in Oceanview, Virginia, these men and officers - they knew. The nucleus of the First Beach Battalion evolved from this rag-tag "bastard" outfit of army-equipped sailors who had dug their slit trenches and foxholes in the sands of North Africa. There already was a feeling of "belonging", a feeling that we would like to be held together as a group for the future, whatever it held for us. We were the first -we were unique. The fact that the feelings remain with most of us at this point in our lives - 50 years after that initial experience - speaks for itself. We didn't know that we were to strike terror into the hearts of the cream of the Signorinas and Mesdemoiselles on the European mainland or that we would be called upon to land four more times on enemy defended beaches, in the first few waves ashore. Wou1d it have made any difference if we had known? I doubt it.

Now followed a period of re-organization into an Army-styled Battalion. Personnel of nine beach parties which had participated in the African invasion were grouped into three companies of three platoons each. A Battalion Headquarters and three Company Headquarters units completed the Battalion of approximately 40 officers and 420 men. This was January. The raw, damp winds around the Norfolk area were not doing anything to keep the Battalion's spirits up. Some thoughtful soul decided we needed the Florida sunshine to bring our training up to snuff. Accordingly, we received our first orders as a Battalion: get on a train and go to Fort Pierce, Florida for amphibious training and exercises with Engineering Regiments of the US Third Army. Ah so. Thirty-two hours in WW I coaches. No "facilities", no food. One stopover somewhere in the Carolinas at which we were marched to the center of town and fed by some very kind ladies who had been warned of our unfed arrival. All of this topped by our having been ordered to make the trip in our dress blue Sunday best uniforms. After dark, on a siding somewhere in Florida we were ordered to dismount and marched to the center of this little town in the Indian River fruit country for re-loading into trucks. Out to an island with rows of pyramidal tents. Rather nice, compared to the shivering musters outside of Quonset huts in our Little Creek home base. No tents yet available for officers so they were trucked back into town for lodging at a small hotel, about ten to a room

The Florida training with the Army Engineer Regiment was "good duty". We were all in the same boat and got along great. One very nice touch was the form of "reveille" decreed by the Regimental Commanding Officer. He had a band. It was a large band. It was a good band. It was a damn good band. Come reveille hour and the band would form up outside the rows of tents fill of sleeping sailors and soldiers, at the far end of a paved stretch of straightaway, which ran through the middle of the camp for about a half mile. As you gradually awakened, you would hear the cadence of muffled drums and marching feet on the macadam road, and then like a blast from a stereo when your wife leaves the house, the band would open up as it reached a

point opposite the first row of tents. It was great. It sent the shivers up your back. You got up feeling it was good to be alive. I don't know if all Army Regiments did the same thing, but it was a good idea. Particularly since we, the naval detachment, shared in the best wake-up time we were ever to get in our military careers. This Colonel, Colonel Mason I believe, was a real trencherman, got along fine with our own candidate, Commander Eubanks, but managed to kill himself and several of his officers when he drove his jeep off a mountain curve near our temporary base at Porto Empedocle, Sicily after we made the invasion there.

We were sorry to see the Fort Pierce duty come to an end. It began with the detachment of "A" Company, under the charge of Lt (jg) Elliott, to proceed north via that infamous troop train and report to the US Coast Guard transport, Leonard Wood, somewhere in the Chesapeake. The orders were to engage in so-called "survival" training with an Army Engineer Battalion. Forty-eight hours on the beach at Solomon's Island about half way up the Chesapeake from Norfolk without blankets or fires. Lt Elliott reports that he and Lt Bill Seaman found that they couldn't move after waddling off the landing craft that brought them to the beach about midnight. They were coated with solid ice from the spray of the landing craft riding high because of the light load and a cross-chop of waves just high enough to break over the ramp as a steady stream of ice water. Other units of the Battalion were embarked on different ships for this exercise. I had the good fortune to embark aboard a rather nice Coastguard ship named the Anne Arundle. My good fortune was short lived since after arriving at the Chesapeake Bay rendezvous, Company "B" Headquarters group, of which I was a member, was shifted into an LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry), aboard which I spent some of the most miserable hours of my life. So miserable was it that I firmly believe that was one of the major considerations which made me leave the Navy and spend the rest of my military career in the Marine Corps after the war. Neither the bone chilling cold of Korea or the stinking jungles of Vietnam were anything near as miserable as that rolling, pitching, bouncing, grunting, groaning amphibious torture chamber. But of course we survived this exercise as we did so many others. The exercise, dreamed up by an Army Colonel who was reported to have been court-martialed because of the number of men suffering loss of fingers and toes from frostbite, had to be called off prior to the 48 hour assigned length when the landing craft were unable to continue with propellers frozen tight. It was THAT cold. Lt Elliott and the men and officers of "A" Company were detached from the Leonard Wood and ordered to report to Camp Bradford, Virginia, which was to become the permanent home base for the Battalion. I don't really remember anymore, but I believe that the same orders were received for those of us in the other companies who were aboard the other ships participating in the exercise. I do remember the final indignity, which was that the trip back to Camp Bradford was to be made by landing craft and the uniform of the day for the trip was ordered to be.. . you guessed it, DRESS BLUES! Of all the absolutely stupid, unthinking, and irresponsible orders I have carried out during my 25 years in the military, this one took the cake. The LCTs and LCLs assigned to the trip were not of the highest quality and some of the coxswains must surely have been trained by Robert Fulton

when he launched his revolutionary steamboat. Lt Elliott's coxswain did his best but managed to hang his LCT up on a sand bar about 75 feet from the beach. Nothing to do then but get as much of the baggage as possible on backs and shoulders, step off the ramp into more of the Chesapeake's frigid waters, and wade ashore... to the great amusement of some other beach battalion members sitting in a jeep to lead the "lucky ones" from this desolate beach to the barracks at Camp Bradford.

There followed a period of several months of tedious waiting, not knowing what or where we were to be sent next. This interval saw one memorable event; the Battalion's first full dress parade for some visiting dignitary. The timing left us with only one day to rehearse something we had never done before. The parade was not all that bad except that one officer in charge of a company strength group heard the order "by the left flank, march", executed it beautifully himself, but neglected to repeat it for his company, who (all 130 of them) marched happily ahead, straight into a farmer's pea crop. The officer retained for the rest of the battalion's lifetime the well-deserved nickname of "Peafield".

Finally things began to stir. We knew from the absence of our officers for meetings with various army groups that something was up. Antennas began to twitch and the scuttlebutt spread. Finally the orders came. We were to sail, for the Mediterranean for an as yet unannounced target. The Battalion was split by the Army into so many different ships that it was impossible to tell if the full battalion-strength ever made the trip. Lt Elliott reports that he was on an AKA with but two of the battalion personnel, our chief yeoman, and our mailman "Sarge" Speraw, who had served in the Navy in World War I. He added that they never knew that the others were aboard. Sic Gloria Transit. The "final four" was about to begin.

The battalion was now at full authorized strength. Battalion Headquarters, Company Headquarters, three companies, nine platoons. During the time that the individual beach parties were in Africa, wheels had been turning in the Amphibious Headquarters, Oceanview, Virginia. Personnel were transferred in from various parts of the country to flesh out the groups returned from the North African campaign. A sizeable contingent of the reporting personnel were from the US Naval Training School (Radio) at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois to replace the communications personnel retained as ship's company when the transports returned from Africa to their Hampton Roads base. Some of those in this group came as communicators and some as seamen – (I was among that group) who had been unable to cope with the nerve shattering dit-dot, dit-dot of the International Morse Code key. We all seem to remember that it was at this time, just prior to the embarkation for the Mediterranean area, that the battalion was commissioned as the USN First Naval Beach Battalion. As best we can determine, no documentation of this truly historic event exists. We have discovered from battalion orders and correspondence at this time that the caption "First Naval Beach Battalion" began to appear as early as February 1943. It is disappointing to all of us at this time that no official record of

this event can be found. It was a benchmark, a milestone in Naval History. No other unit had ever been commissioned in the United States Navy for the specific purpose of conducting beach operations in enemy territory.

BEACHHEAD #2 -- SICILY

Assembling at this time for the invasion of Sicily was the most formidable armada of ships ever witnessed in the course of human events. To elaborate on the formation of this gigantic task force would serve little purpose, since many histories of the ships, both individually and collectively, have been written. Suffice it to say that never before, (and probably never again), will the assemblage of such a Naval Task Force take place. For the purposes of this history I will mention the names of but a few of the vessels involved, and then only because they were the prime carriers of the men and equipment of the 45th Army Infantry Division to which the Beach Battalion was attached.

Of the three major task forces scheduled to make the assault on Sicily, ours was the Western Naval Task Force, commanded by Vice Admiral H. Kent Hewitt. Among the many units in this force was Task Force 85, (Scoglitti Task Force), commanded by Rear Admiral A.G. Kirk. Embarked on the ships of this group was the 45th Army Infantry Division, Reinforced, consisting of some 25,800 officers and men, and commanded by Major General T.H. Middleton. Among the Reinforced Elements of the Division was the 40th Combat Engineer Regiment, to which was attached the First Naval Beach Battalion, commanded by LtCdr J .V. Eubanks, USNR.

Ships involved which have a place in this narrative were the USS ANCON, USS LEONARD WOOD, USS JAMES O'HARA, USS HARRY LEE, USS DOROTHEA L. DIX, USS ANDROMEDA, USS FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE, USS CALVERT, USS NEVILLE, USS FREDERICK FUNSTON, USS ANNE ARUNDEL, USS CHARLES CARROLL, USS THOMAS JEFFERSON, USS WILLIAM P. BIDDLE, USS SUSAN B.ANTHONY, and the USS ARCTURAS. Other vessels involved, except for the support force of battleships, cruisers, destroyers and carriers, were primarily landing craft which were numbered rather than named, and whose actual association with the Beach Battalion cannot be identified at this time. Generally speaking, the majority of our battalion personnel embarked on the transports APAs or the cargo AKAs for the actual assault on the beaches.

Departing the United States in June 1943, the First Beach Battalion's trip across the Atlantic was uneventful. There were, of course, the normal run of reports of sightings of enemy submarines and aircraft, the run-of-the-mill flow of scuttlebutt, which inevitably accompanies the movement of any large contingent of ships in wartime. Whether or not the reports were valid is not known to the writer, but in any event no elements of the First Beach Battalion were lost enroute to our rest and staging area near Oran, Algeria. The ships of our task force inched their way past the ugly sight of scuttled warships of the French Navy, victims of the political mish-mash involving the Vichy government, and anchored in the magnificent protected harbor near the picturesque village of Mers-El-Kabir. Soldiers and sailors were

unloaded and trucked to a practice area near the town of Arzew, several miles to the west of Oran. Then back to the ships and orders distributed. Target SICILY. Bets were paid off and one and all settled down to hurry up and wait.

Shipboard conditions on the voyage from Norfolk to this staging area in Algeria were crowded but livable, nothing like the conditions we were to face in the actual assault run from Africa to Sicily. The food as I recall was nourishing though far from tasty, and notwithstanding the crowded conditions we did receive two hot meals per day. Poker and crap games, although banned, flourished in the hot, fetid troop compartments, and, by the time the ships anchored off the coast of our invasion target, what little money there was, ended up in the hands of a comparatively few individuals whose civilian occupation, I strongly suspect, was that of professional gamblers. But on a monthly salary of $21.00 for an apprentice seaman or fireman, how much could one person lose, and of what use was it anyway where we were headed? Other than time spent in line for meals, and spent in forming up for calisthenics, time was spent in conjecture as to just where we were headed and what we might expect in the way of enemy air attack and ground opposition. How many of us would survive to come back for the next one? The war had given us only a stray wisp of death over our essentially civilian forces. How would we react to real enemy opposition for the first time?

Ever present were the mandatory shipboard emergency exercises. Our constant companion was the trusty lifebelt worn throughout the voyage. A walk on deck, good practice for picking your way through a beach area minefield, would reveal a general show of faked indifference and bravado on the part of all troops embarked. Soldiers felt sorry for the sailors and vice versa. Each thought the other had the wrong end of the stick. Some looked rather poorly, but no one is the picture of health just a day or so away from the unknown reception on enemy defended beaches. A closer examination would reveal an underlying fear of the unknown. Who is there to say that he did not share that fear? For most, it would disappear when the orders were given to head for the beach. Fear and bravery are relative. Each of us has a measure of both. The mix is what is important.

To most of us the city of Oran, which we visited on liberty before finally boarding our ships for the assault run to Sicily was a great surprise. Having been raised in a small farm community in Iowa, my conception of Africa, the “dark continent”, was of a desert-like countryside policed by prides of lions and tigers. What a rude awakening to find instead a city filled with narrow, twisting, filthy alleys swarming with bands of grubby Arab urchins begging. Begging for almost anything - candy, gum, cigarettes, and soap - almost anything they could turn around and sell at their own shrewd profit margin. If the begging didn’t work, the same little hucksters would try to sell you their “beautiful 16 year old sisters”. Never any other age. I think if just one of these enterprising little rascals had changed his pitch by one tiny notch and offered a superb choice of his “beautiful 15 year old sisters”, he would have cornered the market. We ran across one desperate but enterprising young man

who was offering and elderly bundle of rags, a haggish, wizened creature of at least 80, as HIS beautiful sister, probably age 16.

The time spent in and around Oran during this ill-conceived R & R is vague, and I have been unable to come up with any verifiable time span. I think that some of us stayed in the Oran-Arzew area for dry-run rehearsals with our companion Army Engineer units, while others embarked for the area around Bizerte, Tunisia, one of the most fiercely defended last ditch battles by the Germans in Africa. It was a desolate, heavily bombed city, but evidence of its beauty in better times could be seen if a street or building had escaped the fighting. An "illegal" diary kept by Vic Rose, "B" Company indicated our arrival in Oran 22 June, and departure 24 June. I put these dates in the record but I seriously doubt that we remained combat-loaded for the 15 day interval from 24 June to the 10 July D-Day.

I have no trouble remembering the small things - that God awful swirling red dust in the mornings which turned into a muddy quagmire with the coming of the afternoon rains; the insufferably bad Tunisian beer sold by the Arabs in dirty, wicker-covered bottles; and the terribly depressing sight of the poverty in which the native population lived. Finally, you have never, never experienced Africa in all its olfactory glory until you have innocently wandered too close to one of the camels, the pick-up truck of the desert. That tangy aroma from the camel, (bad breath with a hump), or the distinctive essence rising from the driver, or the inevitable combination of the two, produces a formidable odor of no small consequence, a nauseating nostril twitcher that would "gag a dog off a gut wagon".

From available documentation, (again, copies of orders to Lieutenants Elliott and Sleder), it is apparent that the Beach Battalion units re-boarded their ships, either at Mers-El-Kabir or Bizerte, Tunisia, 1 July 1943, and that the actual assault run began 5 July. The First Beach Battalion was about to come to grips with its second landing. Thus began the saga of Operation "HUSKY", the code name assigned to the invasion of the island of Sicily, the doorstep to the Italian gateway to Europe, all to follow closely the Allied occupancy of the island.

The story of the vast water-borne invasion from the time it left its temporary bases in Africa until it disgorged itself on the shores of the island is a story of the United States Navy, and for those of us who participated in it, an unforgettable story. Details of the interwoven intricacies of this gigantic undertaking have been set forth in other histories at other times and will not be repeated herein. "There is no way of conveying the enormous size of this fleet. On the horizon it resembled a distant city. It covered half the skyline, and the dull-colored camouflaged ships stood indistinctly against the curve of the dark water, like a solid formation of uncountable structures blending together. Even to be part of it was frightening. I hope no American ever has to see its counterpart sailing against us". . So wrote war correspondent Ernie Pyle, telling of the great flotilla as it embarked on what is still to this day the biggest amphibious operation in history, involving almost 3,300 ships. Seven Reinforced

Allied Divisions would participate in the assault landings, two more than would make the initial landings in Normandy almost a year later.

Operation "HUSKY' was, among other things, the first allied landing in World War II on Axis home soil. The island was defended by Italian Armies and their German partners, and the landings were to be the start of one of the longest, bitterest, and most controversial campaigns of the war. As reported in Time-Life Books in their history of the Italian Campaign in World War II, the campaign was marked by blunders, omissions, and discord on the Allied side to the point where at times it became almost scandalous. Evidence of this, as it applied to or affected the First Beach Battalion will be discussed later in this section. Generally speaking, and without going into details which have been published many times, the main bone of contention was that the British wanted the invasion of Europe to commence in Sicily, whereas the Americans wanted it to commence on the European mainland, preferably with an English Channel invasion directly on to the mainland of France.

Politics and high level planning aside, the concern of the men of the First Beach Battalion was more basic in nature. How could this vast armada be hidden from German view? How much did they know about this tremendous force moving toward them? If they did know about us, what reception would be waiting for us on the beaches of this place they call Sicily? Would the Italians drop their Axis partners, surrender and get out of the fight? The range of our pre-landing speculation was endless. Or, on the other hand, would the size and scope of this flotilla, never even remotely visualized in the history of mankind to this date, heading for their front door so demoralize the enemy that they would be ineffective in their attempted defense of the island? Actually, for us "snuffies" in the bottom bunks of the lowest level of the troop compartment, we didn't give a tinker's damn what the strategy or long term effects might be. We were miserable and even though the seas were calm when we embarked they didn't stay that way for long.

The ship, (in my case the USS CALVERT), was bulging at the seams with passengers and equipment, as were all the attack transports. Many more men than bunks and more to feed than space in which to feed them. Accordingly we took turns sleeping, eating, and using the heads, (latrines to the Army). Nor was there enough deck space topside for all of us to be up there at the same time. Many had to remain below in the hot, stinking troop compartments - airless, or nearly so. Initially, the trip started off quite pleasantly, other than the overcrowding described above. The seas were calm, and an occasional breeze could be felt on deck. At night it was a never-ending pleasure if you could find a spot to squeeze into along the rail, to marvel at the phosphorescence in the water as the bow cut through the calm surface of the Mediterranean Sea.

The smooth sailing was short lived as the weather took a nasty turn for the worse on D minus l, the night before the night of the landings, (almost causing the responsible brass to cancel the invasion as we later learned). By the time the first assault wave was scheduled to depart for the beach, the sea had grown tremendously, bringing back memories of the mountainous surf the Beach Parties had to contend with in the landing attempts on the west coast of Africa in late 1942. Even the largest of ships were rolling and pitching in the building storm. The wind was increasing alarmingly, which boded ill for the scheduled drop of airborne troops, and did in fact prove disastrous, forcing them to scatter their drops in unscheduled places all over the island. The weather worsened significantly as D-Day progressed. By dusk of D-Day the seas were mountainous. Those of us who had already come ashore marveled at the ability of the widespread convoy of ships of all sizes and types to stay afloat in the wallowing, convulsive seas. We all learned a lesson in respect for the abilities of those in charge of that mammoth flotilla, many captaining their first vessel in the war's accelerated commissioning.

We were made agonizingly aware of the immensity of the weather problem when the landing craft for the initial assault waves were lowered from the davits of the transports in their unloading areas some 7 to 8 miles off shore. Initially, the assault troops were loaded into the small landing craft - personnel, (LCVPs), prior to their being lowered into the churning waves below. This was quickly determined to be a disaster. The tremendous rise and fall of the swells would momentari1y hold a landing craft on the swell, then drop away to a trough, causing the lines from the davits to snap under the full weight of the boat and its personnel, pitching the boat crews and terrified troops, heavily loaded with guns and ammunition, to their deaths in the frothing witch's cauldron in the blackness somewhere down there below the speechless others on deck awaiting their turn.

To eliminate additional troop casualties from this disastrous method, the small boats were subsequently lowered into the water with only the boat crews aboard, (as was done in the North African landings). Then when, (and if), the boats were "safely" in the water and detached from the davits, the assault troops were ordered over the side to make that treacherous trip down the cargo nets to the landing craft, presumed to be down there somewhere in the blackness. This method, of course, as we had learned earlier in the rolling seas off the Atlantic coast of Africa, had serious drawbacks also. Debarking troops, if they managed to make their way safely down the spaghetti-like cargo nets, soaking wet and slippery, ignoring the occasional crushed fingers, and placing the first foot tentatively on the landing craft's gunwales with the other still in the webbing of the cargo net only to find a moment later that the boat had disappeared into a trough 10 or 15 feet below the level at which the frightened soldier had first placed that tentative foot on the boat. The unfortunate troops were left in the air, desperately trying to find a segment of net into which they could place at least one foot, knowing that they must hang on somehow until the boat came back up on the next rise - and then try it all over again.

Compounding the situation was the roll and pitch of the transports, which terrorized the troops on the nets with their heavy outward, rolls over nothing but ocean and then the smashing counter roll against the rough, barnacle-encrusted sides of the ships. Farther down the side, many soldiers were caught on this counter-swing and crushed between the landing craft and the transports' hull as both vessels gyrated in the churning seas. It was not a night to remember. I, personally, have no idea how many casualties resulted from these circumstances, but if all transports were in a situation similar to ours on the CALVERT, (as I'm sure they were), the resultant casualty total must have been significant. Until, and unless you have inched your way down a wet, slimy, slippery network of rope which is constantly in vertical and horizontal motion as its occupants try to take one more step to their destiny down there in the blackness, with 40 to 50 pounds of food, ammunition and weapons fastened somewhere on their bodies, sliding, grasping, slipping into that ridiculous little boat wallowing around in the monstrous and remorseless seas, it would be difficult to envision what a terrifying experience it could be. Finally, the knowing that once the first stage - a standing room only space in the landing craft - had been reached, they were to be transported somehow in this bucking, rolling piece of lumber with a ramp, through the pounding surf which would turn out to be just as ugly as they were imagining, onto a stretch of enemy beach, reported to be heavily mined, with the enemy lying in wait behind the dunes, cross-hairs zeroing in on their boats as they made the final approach, did absolutely nothing to erase the terror of the cargo net descent a short time before. And yet, thousands and thousands of US civilians, dressed briefly in brown or blue, made this descent into the maelstrom from their transports and this run to the beaches exactly as I have described. An amphibious landing operation under these conditions is a real character builder. The fact that we were now melded into a unified, battalion strength group of men, going through this new experience together, tightened a few more turns in the bonds that were increasingly bringing us together as a cohesive unit - The First Naval Beach Battalion. On a personal note, the writer was fortunately of very small stature at the time of this landing, spindly to be precise, and when my trip down the net resulted in falling into the small boat, my back pack broke the fall, and I realized I had made it - in one piece; a small piece to be sure, but still one piece. Others disembarking with me were not so fortunate. Many felt that their $21 monthly paycheck had been earned on just this one night. I can't argue with that.

An actual documentation of the landing locations or sequence of the battalion personnel is not available. It probably didn't exist. We were scattered all up and down the coast, having been assigned ship space on a "whatever is left" basis by the Army, and many came ashore as individuals or in small groups as hitchhikers. It took the better part of D-Day for us to re-group into some semblance of an operational amphibious beach control battalion, paired off with our Army Engineer Corps "shore party" counterparts. The re-organization under these trying circumstances was aggravated by the time it took to accomplish this on foot. Walking was difficult - everything we had brought ashore on our backs or tied to us had to be manhandled as we slogged around in the sand or surf trying to get to where we belonged. It is hard

to believe, but at this time, and for this long-planned invasion, the First Beach Battalion had been sent overseas, all 450 of us without a single piece of equipment that we obviously would need to accomplish even a small part of what was expected of us. Not a jeep, not a truck, nothing but our bare hands to handle the broached or abandoned landing craft that early in the day had piled up on the beaches in alarming numbers -jack straws in the sand. A miserable collection of obsolete communications equipment was in our possession, carried ashore and up and down the beaches on the backs of our radiomen and signalmen. Our doctors must have been given some equipment, possibly from the ships from which they debarked, because I remember them taking care of large numbers of our own paratroops shot down by the guns of our own ships the night of D-Day; the result of the allied paratroop drop colliding with a totally unexpected enemy air raid over the beach area.

This short-sighted bit of economy-minded stupidity resulted in the loss of so many landing craft that had been promised to the allied forces assembling in England for the cross-channel invasion training, that that, and other, planned operations had to be delayed for weeks, and in some cases, for months. Some one in the planning section of "HUSKY" had decided that the army and navy beach groups could push the broached craft off with nothing more than the brute strength of men up to their keisters in pounding surf. The boat crews were nothing to brag about, but with the minimal training they had been given, it is understandable why they were so quick to abandon their broached craft as "lost to enemy action" and head for the dunes with visions of destroyer, cruiser or carrier duty dancing in their heads. The tragic aspect of this scene, repeated all day and night over the entire length of the invasion beaches, was that in several instances, two or three men from the battalion, with no experience whatsoever in what they were doing, climbed aboard a broached craft, started the engine, brought the boat around to the correct angle to the beach, backed it out through the surf and in a short time delivered it to its mother ship, gratis. If the battalion had been properly equipped, many of the abandoned landing craft could have been salvaged in this same manner and returned to their ships for continued use in this and the invasions still to come. Lieutenant Elliott, now the Battalion Executive Officer, risked court-martial by writing a lengthy, scathing, minutely documented condemnation of the officers responsible for what he felt was gross negligence and inexcusable dereliction of duty. He was not court-martialed; he was not censured; he was not praised. Someone must have read the report. A short time after we had returned to our new African base at Karouba, the inland protected harbor near Bizerte, Tunisia, we sent a large group of men to Algiers "for delivery of vehicles for the USN First Beach Battalion". A few days after the drivers and the vehicles returned, a large field near the tents and huts of the battalion bristled with a collection of vehicles and equipment of every description. Everything we had asked for except for PT boats to be used for offshore traffic control, and LCIs for use as salvage vessels. Men and officers were swarming over this equipment with stencils at the ready. I don't know what the Freudian connection might be, but our nine doctors started an instant love affair with the nine mammoth D-l4 bulldozers, the

largest in the Caterpillar Tractor Corporation's arsenal. The Battalion morale was pretty good.

To get back to the invasion. No operations order can be found, but it is believed that the majority of the Battalion landed in the first three waves with the assault troops, standard procedure so that landing lights, communications, and medical evacuation stations could be organized before the follow-up troops came storming across the beaches. After the first two days it was possible to step back and assess the battalion's situation. It was apparent that we had been landed on a stretch of about 15+ miles of soft, hot sand. With only two days in this mid-summer heat, wind, and salt-water spray, the men were already suffering from bad cases of sun poisoning. Lips were swollen, salt-encrusted, split-open pieces of raw meat. In most cases the men appeared to have a small orange in their mouths that they were unable to swallow. Those who had ignored orders, issued for their own protection, and had stripped down to the waist, now regretted their actions while they watched the blisters break as they worked in the surf. Those of light complexion suffered the most. But, as Alexander the Great, among others, was known to say at times, "War is Hell".

Some of the early chaos was unavoidable. Battalion personnel had been sent ashore from thirteen transports and AKAs (cargo ships), onto an early scattering of five different areas ranging from 10 miles northwest of the little fishing village of Scoglitti to six miles south. The rampaging surf made a shambles of the planned landing schedules. As D-day wore on, it became ever more difficult for approaching landing craft to find an uncluttered stretch of beach on which to land its cargo or personnel; they cruised off-shore until they found an open spot and roared in to unload and get out of there. Chaos. Fortunately for the Beach Battalion, enemy resistance was again much lighter, than expected. As a result, in spite of our wide dispersion, it was possible to consolidate our units and prepare the beach areas quickly for the vast unloading job about to begin. Of immediate concern was the number of landing craft lost or stranded on the beaches. As previously noted, this may have been justified to some extent by the rampaging seas and the seeming inability of the control boats to bring the landing waves into the proper beaches at the proper times, but generally speaking, and without undue indictment of the boat crews as a whole, there seemed to be overwhelming evidence of carelessness, negligence, and a serious lack of training in the handling of the landing craft. The crews manning the landing craft from the USS Leonard Wood, the Coast Guard transport, however, performed in an entirely different manner; their superb landing and retraction technique proved beyond any doubt that if the run-of-the-mill crews had been given the same training, many, possibly a majority of the landing craft lost might have been saved. It was an expensive lesson. The fact that many boats were re-floated arid saved by beach battalion personnel after they had been abandoned by their ship's company crews speaks for itself. Lack of training and lack of discipline proved very costly in this invasion. Upwards of 200 of these personnel landing craft were stranded on the beach. A valid record of just how many landing craft were

permanently destroyed by tidal action after having been permitted to be caught by the wave action and tossed high and dry on the beach, invariably parallel to it, and impossible to re-float, is unknown. But a glance up and down the beach would confirm the fact that the number was significant.

In the case of the 36 and 50-foot boats, part of the problem stemmed from tendency to swamp over the stern when loaded too heavily aft, or to fill with water and swamp when the ramp was lowered and the boats were too heavily loaded forwarded. Most common though was the taking on of the seas over the sides, particularly when overloaded, or when permitted to broach to, parallel to the shoreline. The rapid build-up of wet sand around the hull made any craft left in this position for more than fifteen minutes almost impossible to re-float under its own power. A ship, such as an LCI equipped with winches was the only hope for this class of strandees. Even if we had been given such salvage vessels, the sheer numbers of stranded boats would have prevented saving them all. In just a few short hours in this kind of surf and sand, boats were smashed beyond salvage possibilities. What proportion might have been saved if we had been given the equipment is pure guesswork**.** Even a few would have been a good return on the investment of whatever it cost to equip the Beach Battalion with the LCIs**.** Some, in a position to know, reported to us that with just two of these craft equipped with powerful winches we might have saved as many as 150 of the over 200. A very, very good investment.

The good part of the landing craft performance in HUSKY was the example set by the larger craft, (LCTs, LCIs & LSTs) and the DUKWs. From our viewing positions these vessels were manned by experienced, competent, crews. They beached at the time and locations scheduled, were relatively easy to unload, and, when unloaded, retracted with few problems. More extensive use of these craft, in particular the amphibious trucks called "DUKWs' in all future operations was obvious to anyone on the beaches during these landings. The DUKWs could come ashore at a reasonable speed, considering their dual capabilities of running on land or in the water, cruising up through the soft-deep sand on their big fat tires to their assigned supply dumps. Quickly unloaded, they nosed their way back to the beach, bothering no one, slipped into the surf, bounced their way through it, and were soon back at their mother ships waiting for the next load. No effort was required by any battalion personnel on the beach.

After the initial assault landings, the battalion spent the better part of the first two days consolidating its units in and around the tiny village of Scoglitti. Operations continued in that area for the next nine days. During that time we performed the usual communications, salvage and stevedore work. The medical operations plan seemed to us to be poorly designed. The medical situation was already troublesome. Nine young doctors, barely started in their civilian practices and 72 hospital corpsmen were forced to idle away their time between invasion landings in irritating "made work". Now to find that in an actual wartime invasion their duties consisted primarily of passing bodies across the beach into landing craft for transport to the hospital ships was even more irritating. This waste of medical talent, training, and knowledge was the subject of bitter criticism in the operational report prepared after

the invasion by Lieutenant Elliott, our Exec, who was not known for his silence when something like this occurred in any of our operations.

Considering the number of Army medical personnel on the beach at any given time, it was soon apparent that no Navy medics were necessary as long as the Army was taking care of the evacuation and beach treatment of its dead and wounded. Without going any further into the organizational aspects of this particular landing in Sicily, I would be remiss were I not to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Elliott and the other Battalion officers and senior Petty Officers whose input made the Sicilian Operational Report possible: for having the guts to speak out and say what they believed at a time when it was not deemed fashionable or advisable to "rock the boat", so to speak. Well done, gentlemen.

Having covered some of the technical aspects of the assault landings, a short narrative of the more personal aspects of this landing can now be made. Again, exact times escape, but as I recall, the assault time frames were in the wee hours of the morning, considerably before daybreak. Enemy action, while not as extensive as expected, was present in all of its reality. Especially nerve-wracking to the uninitiated was the never-ending air attacks and artillery barrages on the beaches. Notwithstanding the deep, soft, shifting sand. I managed to excavate a rather large foxhole during my first few minutes on the beach, doggy fashion. Not that it was all that valuable, since the nature of our work kept us out of such holes and on the surface of the beach day and night. The holes quickly became somewhat of a nuisance and hazard to beach navigation, but in my mind it was reassuring to know it was there if the occasion arose to use it.

The landing craft I was in failed, as did many others, to make it across an outlying sand bar and as a result we got very, very damp on the run to the beach from about 20 yards out. Taxing my Charles Atlas (all 115 pounds of it) physique to the limits, and encumbered with pack, weapon, ammunition, rations, etc., etc., I waded through the waist deep surf at a very rapid pace, and finally, almost pooped out, I staggered onto the beach and collapsed. After I recovered from the initial shock of reality that there really was someone up there in the dunes shooting at us, and after I made contact with other battalion members that I knew, my self-assurance returned somewhat and from then on it was a piece of cake, (he said). Actually I can recall very little of the early hours of the landing aside from the fact that it was a new and frightening experience. We had received word, or heard rumors, that the airborne units scheduled to make their drops prior to the assault landing had run into extreme difficulties from the same foul weather that had plagued the ships and ground forces, and were scattered all along the coast and at unscheduled drops inland. Other rumors had German "Tiger" tanks coming in on our flank, a rumor that failed to materialize, and the rampant rumor of counterattacks was with us constantly during the first day of the landing. Probably the most unsettling event of our entire nine days on the beach was the night of that first day, when, during the course of a German air raid on the Seventh Army landing area attracting a horrendous display of anti-aircraft fire

from every allied ship in the area, a flight of U.S. C-47s carrying two thousand paratroops from the 82nd Airborne Division came in very low, only a few hundred feet above the waves, and were immediately engulfed in the gunfire from approximately 5000 guns of all calibers from the fleet escort ships, the transports, the auxiliaries and from the beach. Everyone within reach of a gun, authorized or not, Army and Navy equally, finally felt they personally had a chance to take a crack at the enemy bombers overhead. The skies soon presented an awesome sight. The colored tracers strung out like so many strings of beads, crisscrossed the outlines of planes caught momentarily in the glare of the high-powered searchlights, and punctuated with the barnyard like variety of sounds from the exploding shells and enemy bombs was an unforgettable experience for every one of us. So this was what the simple word "war" was all about. Many new sensations and feelings were forged that night.

But the tentative feeling of "we creamed them" soon gave way before the terrible tally of what we had lost. The final tally of this unfortunate raid on our own troops - the incomparable paratroops of the 82nd Airborne, quickly blotted out any feeling of euphoria. Twenty-three of the giant C-47 transport planes had been totally destroyed. Thirty-seven were badly damaged and probably beyond salvage in this front line area. One of the C-47s crashed on our beach in front of our horrified eyes. Our medical corpsmen and doctors did their best but a wartime crash of any aircraft heavily loaded with human beings is no different from a civilian crash. Every one of us has seen pictorial presentations of those crashes on our nightly TV news or movie house "Pathe" News. There is no need to elaborate here. It was a sickening, sobering sight. Another sliver of reality in our gradually increasing experience of the meaning of the word war

The word had it that a failure in communications somewhere along the line resulted in the tragedy. A simple little thing like that erupted into the nightmare of hundreds of our own men being shot down by their comrades in arms. Looking back now, it is probable that even had the ships and shore batteries been aware of the incoming flight, the 82nd would have been unable to complete their drops unscathed. The arrival of the C-47s loaded with paratroops over the invasion fleet at the exact moment in time as the raiding German bombers in the pre-dawn blackness was a one-in-a-thousand occurrence. Major General Matthew Ridgeway, Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, after reviewing reports of the disaster, later said, "The losses are part of the inevitable price of war in terms of human lives".

The First Beach Battalion operations continued in the Scoglitti area for nine days from the initial landings on 10 July. On 19 July the Army ordered the beaches closed and the troops to start the march to the interior. That morning Beach Battalion personnel on the beaches noted something suspicious. What were those "things" in the surf rolling towards shore? A few of our trained scavengers waded out to see. The things were our things, slowly coming to us on the morning tide. Footlockers, duffle bags, loose miscellaneous personal belongings, uniforms and, as a final insult,

the salt-encrusted Battalion typewriter, a miserable balky Underwood portable - reputedly the best they could come up with in the warehouses in and around Norfolk for a newly commissioned outfit for which no one had issued supply authorizations. It was salvaged, cleaned, de-salted, and used for such orders and reports that had to be typed, until we eventually reached our new base in Tunisia at a small inland port facility called Karouba, near the bombed out city of Bizerte.

As the beach scavengers were pawing over the incoming debris, others arrived on the scene. Lifting their eyes to the horizon resulted in another shock on the eventful morning. Where were the ships? Where was the fleet? Where were the ships that brought us from Norfolk and landed us on this Sicilian capitol of the mosquito and sand flea malarial world? Gone. One ship, through our binoculars, appeared to be still at anchor. One of our Army Engineer friends offered us his DUKW for a quick visit to this last remnant of that mighty fleet that had brought us. The Captain of this AKA knew nothing of any orders that should have been issued to the Beach Battalion. He radioed one command after another, each one notch above the last. Finally, since he wanted out of there too, he slipped around official protocol and communicated directly with the Navy in Washington.

The end result was that we received verbal orders to wait on the beach for whatever transport the naval forces in that area could spare, and when that arrived, to proceed up the coast about 80 miles to a little town called Porto Empedocle and stand by there until shipping could be spared to transport us to our new African Base at Karouba.

The only memorable things I can recall of this tag end of "HUSKY" were the delightful open-air head/latrine dug for us within a few feet of a side-walk running through this little town, with nothing between the sitters and the curious, giggling-but-courteous, townsfolk. The population of the town was evidently in terrible shape economically as they had neither food to eat nor water to drink. There was an abundance of very pretty young ladies around town (if you scraped the dirt off their faces), who were not shy about indicating that they would indeed trade "anything" for food, water, candy, or cigarettes. We accommodated them as best we could, with rations, bitter chocolate, a few cigarettes, and of course whatever water we could spare; but being highly moral and provincial types, we of course refused their offers of "anything" in return. Oh I suppose I could come up with a few names of battalion members who, not wishing to hurt the young ladies feelings, took them up on their offers, but at this time, some fifty years later, why stir up a hornets nest among our wives (most of whom were not our wives at that time). Porto Empedocle also boasted some ancient Roman ruins just outside town, which stirred the imaginations of those of us who were archeologically inclined, and we spent a few hours going through the "historic district". We did accomplish a few beneficial things while there, in that we were assigned to help guard prisoners in a huge German prison compound which was being run by the British. Permanent guards at the compound were East Indian Gurkhas whose stature, combined with their turbans and beards

presented a very disconcerting picture to those German POWs who ventured too near the fenced compound. These were the same gentlemen whose combat specialty was slipping through the lines at night and presenting the enemy with lovely stainless steel necklaces which, when properly placed around the neck negated the necessity for any further haircuts since there was no longer a head to trim.

The other unusual event I recall was the jam-packed load we made on an LCT they sent to the Scoglitti beaches to pick us up for the night trip up the coast to Porto Empedocle. About halfway to our destination, this LCT (Landing Craft Tank), more affectionately called garbage scows, came to a stop, dead in the water at approximately 2 a.m. The absolute silence woke any of us who were sleeping, literally standing or leaning against something. Anyone who has been on a ship with its menu of sounds will remember the eerie "sound" of complete silence. No engines no blowers, no radios, all stopped. The reason was soon passed down the line - we were in a minefield of floating balls with spines all around the surface. Daylight introduced us to the reason we had stopped -we were surrounded by these evil looking, rusty globes with their "fingers" just waiting to be tapped for the explosives to work. I can't recall whether the skipper maneuvered his way through the field or called for a sweeper. What I do remember is that we were now in a 6 mile per hour barge off the coast of a partially enemy-held area, wide open for any shore batteries or a tasty target for almost any kind of a German plane with a bomb or capable of strafing. We reached our port without anything happening to us. Not to worry.

A period of about ten days of irksome waiting finally came to an end. An LST (Landing Ship, Tank) arrived and we loaded up once more for the trip to the new base in Africa. The trip was not too pleasant. These LSTs have no keel and are about the length of a football field. When they pitch or roll it is downright scary. (Subsequent to the return of the Beach Battalion to the US in 1944, I was assigned to LST 818. and aboard her, made the invasion of Okinawa in 1945). The LSTs and their pups, the LCTs, had a reputation of "breaking up" when the length of the ship was longer than the interval between waves. Just snap in the middle like a license plate played with too long. But we finally did arrive at Karouba and took up residence in an empty aircraft hangar.

From the beginning of the assault runs 5 July 1943, to our arrival in Karouba on 27 July. 1943, a little over three weeks, the battalion had moved closer to being an operative unit. We were not too apprehensive about where they planned to send us next. We were now equipped with a lavish collection of equipment and vehicles. We were beginning to feel confident that we could perform even better in the next assignment. The Sicilian saga was now kaput. **WHERE TO NEXT?**

BEACHHEAD #3 - SALERNO ITALY

BACKGROUND

It should be remembered that the entire complement of the First Beach Battalion had been brought from the States in a large number of ships of all types, and landed over a wide area of beach in Sicily. At the completion of that operation, all units of the Battalion were briefly in one location, the port village called "Porto Empedocle", literally living on nuts and berries. The Battalion in its entire history was never provided with a field kitchen of any kind. We ate off the land and off various army units to which we were attached. At Porto Empedocle, while waiting for transportation, we had no army friends. Thanks to our doctors, who scoured the countryside on foot, we ate - not well, but thanks to the medics, without fear of anything worse than dysentery.

Finally, and gradually, transportation came in the form of various landing craft on their way back to African ports. It is believed that our Porto Empedocle assemblage represented the last time the battalion was entirely centered in one place. With our departure from the Porto Empedocle/Aqrigento area in late July, the second of the five landings of the battalion ended. We returned, aboard available shipping to North Africa and immediately embarked on a systematic and comprehensive training program consisting primarily of "dry runs" or more understandably, practice amphibious landings. Here again my memory is dim as to our exact locations in Africa however the names of Mers-El-Kabir, Arzew, and Mostaganem are etched in my memory so our return must have been to the Oran area. Mostaganem particularly brings back fond memories since that was the location of an establishment known as "The American Bar", reputedly serving the only hamburgers available in North Africa (at least commercially). Also available was a taste-tingling Arab beverage reputed to be beer. Served hot (no ice in North Africa) from its wicker encased bottle, this lethal concoction convulsed the stomachs of even such stalwarts as John Zesut and Vic Rose, two Battalion specialists in fermented beverage procurement and consumption. And the hamburgers? Not bad really if you overlooked the proprietor of the bar in the back room skinning camels.

From the time the battalion departed Sicily until the time of the landing at Salerno, a scant five weeks went by but the time seemed more like an eternity since all pretty much knew that the next landing was going to be somewhere on the Italian coast and, at that time, the Italians had not yet surrendered nor were we privy to any information about German troop strengths on the peninsula. The monotony of waiting was alleviated to a degree by the seemingly endless dry runs and debarkation drills we were subjected to. Probably because of the carnage encountered in Sicily while debarking down landing nets from troop ships in monstrous seas, the emphasis seemed to be more on debarkation drills than anything else and probably rightly so. As it turned out however the net drills were quite useless since the Battalion units

which made the Salerno landings were embarked on landing craft type shipping and in general, at least on red beach, stepped ashore at Salerno Bay onto dry land. Green beach was different and units landing there had to wade in from the landing craft due to the beach gradient.

As Jack Elliott remembers it, a good portion of the battalion was transported to our new base at Karouba prior to the Salerno landing. The men were housed in an abandoned airplane hangar and the officers in what was left of the former French Officer's Quarters. Lieutenant Elliott, in this group, had this to relate after their first few days in this location. "First night - air raid sirens erupted and we ran out to watch the fascinating sight of the giant searchlights crisscrossing each other until one picked up a bomber. Several then converged on the plane in a pinpoint of brilliant light. The anti-aircraft emplacements then opened up and it was Dante's Inferno in Technicolor. We all stood there gawking like Iowa farm boys at the Little Egypt exhibit at the county fair, (Lt Elliott and the writer are both small town Iowans and we know whereof we speak), until somebody said, "It's starting to rain". Another gawker yelled 'ouch'. We then became aware of the fact that flak -shrapnel from the anti-aircraft batteries - was falling on us, out there without any protection, even our helmets. Quickly inside. Nowhere to go, so sat on the steps from ground floor to first, thinking we were protected. A brand new battery of British Bofors anti-aircraft artillery was just a few feet from where we had picked to wait out the raid. Off it went, pom-pom pom-pom. . Our shirts were literally lifted from our backs. The sensation was not of noise although in theory there must have been plenty of that, it was of air being sucked out of you and your surroundings. Not good. Second night - management had spent the day distributing smoke-makers all around the base. A large collection of cruisers and destroyers were in the harbor several hundred feet away, all with smoke facilities. Sirens, the drone of planes, our heading for holes in the ground this time. And then we started gasping. We were the bottom layer of a blanket of thick chemical smoke, undoubtedly quite effective in hiding the assembled fleet and buildings from the bombers overhead but devastating to those victims, us, of the over-eager trainee smokers. Third night - As soon as it started to get dark we borrowed a couple of jeeps and headed for the hills overlooking the Mediterranean near Bizerte. From that night on when smoke started, we headed for our vantage point in the hills."

Those of us who had moved from the Oran area to the Bizerte area in preparation for the oncoming landing continued our practice landings in that area with little diversion except for the daily visits (by radio) of the famed "Axis Sally". She would come on the short wave each night with comments on what we had done that day. What was a bit unnerving, was that she was able to tell us exactly where we were going and when we were scheduled to land. She would also remind certain individuals (by name) that their wives/girl friends were back in the states sleeping with the draft dodgers or 4-Fs that were in the States. We found out later that our landing operational schedules had somehow fallen into German hands. That with her Arab spotters on the beaches where we were carrying out our practice operations

made her pronouncements invariably accurate. Apparently none of this made those in charge uneasy enough to discuss any changes in plans, however.

We now had vehicles. As a result of Lt. Elliott's defense of the Beach Battalion personnel's failure to prevent the terrible loss of landing craft in the landings at Sicily - an ordeal, he reports, as he had to read his critique before a board of amphibious captains and commanders, and then answer questions for the better part of an hour. His final comment may have helped. He held out both hands, palms up, and quietly said, "Gentlemen, these are the tools and equipment we were given to handle that storm on the Sicilian beach. There are two here, count them".

A week later we received word to send a group of Battalion men, all drivers, in Company strength, to Algiers to "pick up equipment consigned to the First Beach Battalion". Off they went, happy to get out of camp for a few days, and with much curiosity as to what the word "equipment" meant. Their return was unannounced. Late one afternoon we saw this convoy of trucks, DUKWs, jeeps, weapons carriers and big, shiny, yellow Caterpillar Tractor D-l4 bulldozers on their prime movers, pull up along the road near our pyramidal tent and Quonset hut quarters. Seventy-one vehicles in all, including 21 of the best little war machines known to man, the beloved C-5 Jeep of Willie and Joe fame. I think the battalion morale must have gone up a few notches as we swarmed over these newly added tools to our repertoire. Just to look, walk around, kick the tires, try the steering was fun for one and all. Yes, FUN. The battalion was loose, even though we knew that we were off to another invasion landing in just a few weeks, and that some would not be coming back. Our melding into a unified battalion was increasing all the time.

The battalion did not have to wait long for the next invasion. Salerno, a little town on a beautiful bay south of the big anchorage at Naples, was to be the target. Several Divisions of the British Eighth Army, who had just finished the chase of Rommel across the desert and were instrumental in the defeat of the German Afrika Korps, were to land in the northern sector, near the town of Salerno. The Americans were to land some 15 miles to the South with two divisions, the 36th (Texas), under General Walker, and our old friends, the 45th under General Middleton. The First Beach Battalion personnel were assigned to the northern sector, the British area.

Shipping was so scarce for this landing that the Beach Battalion was limited to one reinforced Company. Company "B" was selected, reinforced by personnel from Company "A". We were attached to a British Royal Engineer Shore Party known as a "Brick". Some of Company C was sent on temporary duty to the American Sector. We think that this group stayed in Italy with the American forces, moving with them up the coast to Naples, forming the group that came to be known as the "Schoolhouse Gang".

On 15 August 1943, Operations Plan No. 1 for operation "buttress" (subsequently changed to "AVALANCHE" was received by the Battalion. For those of you who

are history buffs. I have included a copy of this order as an appendix. Although marked SECRET, the order has been declassified. As stated above, Company "B", reinforced by personnel from Company "A", were selected for this landing. The northern sector, nearest the town of Salerno, designated as "RED BEACH", was in charge of the Battalion's Commanding officer, Jim Eubanks; the southern sector in charge of our Battalion Executive Officer, Jack Elliott, was designated "GREEN BEACH".

Before getting into the description of the Battalion's part in these landings, I am going to insert a quotation from a caustic book by Eric Morris titled

SALERNO

A Military Fiasco

"The mistake was Eisenhower's. After the Allies scored victories in North Africa and Sicily, the next step was the continent, but where? It was decided to keep the landing destination secret. Even the preliminary bombardment of the beaches by naval guns was eliminated, at great risk to the troops landing. But anybody with a simple compass could draw a circle centered on the nearest Allied air bases in Sicily and come to the conclusion that the only suitable harbor within round-trip distance was the port of Salerno.

Salerno was to be taken by the first integrated Anglo-American force. The American contingents chosen for the landing were the Texans of the 36th Division, totally inexperienced in battle, and another National Guard Division, the 45th, largely drawn from Oklahoma and New Mexico. As for the British, what some of their troops learned on landing so dismayed them that they mutinied (for which some of the mutineers were later sentenced to death). To win the battle, the Allies needed to gain the high ground; for nine bloody days what they gained were the beaches drenched in their own blood".

Complicating this whole mess was the questionable decision by the Allied Headquarters to announce the surrender of Italy while the invasion fleet was offshore on their last segment of daylight runs. While we sat out there to be counted and divided up by the Germans who had quickly thrown the newly-non-combatant Italians out of their defensive positions and moved their own men and far superior armor, tanks, and artillery batteries into position, we were led to believe that the landings would be unopposed. We should have suspected something when late in thee afternoon of D minus 1 German Stukas came down our column of landing craft, setting several afire with their single strafing run. Why did they do that? We still, at least at our level, could not put two and two together and come up with the entirely possible, really probable, solution; the Germans were now in charge of the defense of the beaches we were scheduled to assault starting at midnight.

At this point my co-author, Lt. Jack Elliott, will take over the writing chore and describe the operations on GREEN BEACH. This was the beach on which "B" Co., Platoon 6 (reinforced) was scheduled to land. Responsibility for preliminary examination of the beach area, rerouting of succeeding waves as necessary, guide duties for personnel and equipment of the battalion landing in following waves, installation of flank and landing point beach markers, and posting and supervision of guard and watched details was assigned to Ensign Herman (B-6). Lt (jg) Yeager had identical duties for RED BEACH to the north. Responsibility for preliminary and subsequent detailed hydrographic reconnaissance for LCT and LST landing approaches, final determination of acceptable landing points in cooperation with Royal Engineers responsible for reconnaissance of beach exits inland, general supervision of naval beach functions and advance preparation of ship cargo diagrams to supplement the loading plans to Lt (jg) Winn (B-6) for Green Beach and Lt (jg) Moe Levenstein for Red Beach. The supervision of salvage operations and coordination of the salvage operations on the beach with the Task Force Salvage Officer operating from seaward was assigned to Lt (jg) Shearon, (A-3) for Green Beach and to Lt(jg) Walrath (A-2) for Red Beach.

GREEN BEACH – SALERNO

By Lt. O. J. (Jack) Elliott

With the announcement of the Italian "surrender", our attitude toward this landing lightened up. We didn't have the customary exhilaration, the high, the adrenaline pumping as we turned toward the shore. The segment I was with was embarked in an LCI (Landing Craft Infantry), below decks until we grounded and the ship's control officer opened the doors to the deck. Simultaneously with grounding on the proverbial sandbar, a barrage of gunfire greeted us. It gave me the feeling that I had stumbled into the midst of the working part of a Fourth of July fireworks display of gigantic proportions. I wished for my sunglasses. With no real reason to hold back, I made my way down the lending ramp which ran down the bow of the landing craft, followed closely by Ensign Randy Herman, a very gutsy, very young kid who was to perform many duties preparatory to bringing in the following a landing craft waves. We waded through waist deep water to the point where water meets sand and instinct told us to drop. We did.

It was time to re-think this thing. We had not been told of the fact that there was a farmhouse and a canal tollhouse, directly behind this beach. We reviewed what we did know and decided that this welcome was by hostile Germans, not the friendly Italians we had been led to expect. Randy and I reviewed what we did know. We knew that the tide was coming in and that our bodies except for shoulders and head were now fully immersed and our position would become untenable; we knew that the fire coming from the farm house and the canal toll house was becoming heavier, indicating eagerness and plenty of ammunition; we knew ***that they*** knew we were there and that the LCI was there. We knew that the shallow beach we were looking at was mined, and that the British Engineer sappers had not yet been there. Maybe we had landed on the wrong stretch of beach; probably not. We had been told that the Germans had copies of our plans, where landings were to be made and would be waiting for us. The surrender fiasco negated our expectation of very little real resistance. But the plain, bald truth was that they certainly had been looking for us to land in this very spot.

So, we decided we preferred taking the chance of setting off one or more of those German "Daisy Cutter" land mines to lying there and either drowning or becoming so exposed to increased small arms fire that we would soon be dead meat. We wished each other luck; Randy took off first and ran a superb fifty-yard dash to the friendly slope of this huge sand dune, which appeared to be about fifteen feet high. I followed, stepping in what little I could see of his footprints. (We found out later from the sappers that the takeover of beach defenses by the Germans just a few days prior caused so much resentment by the Italian labor crew that most of the beach

mines hurriedly installed on this stretch of beach were buried with the safeties on.) We weren't as brave and fearless as we thought.

Gradually, more and more of the Battalion elements assigned to Green Beach showed up. I suspect they were brought in to Red Beach and walked down to Green Beach. I had other problems at the moment. We shushed everybody, and confirmed our initial belief that we were hearing German and voices, almost whispers, as though there were very close and didn't want to be heard by those invaders in their territory.

By now, my good friend the Cincinnati lawyer Bill Seaman, had arrived and we agreed that those voices could mean trouble. I carefully climbed up the slope of this sand dune, making as little noise as possible, realizing later that with all of the firing I didn't have to play gumshoe. I slowly edged my head above the rim and found myself staring at a well-camouflaged pillbox, gun slits and machine gun barrels poking through at the ready. (They probably had no choice but to let us reach the protection of the dune because none of their gun slits would have permitted lowering the trajectory to the level of the mined stretch of beach). The whispering stopped. I had the distinct sensation of something crawling up and down my back. Some post-war psychiatrist can field that one. I stared at this concrete thing with its protruding gun barrels and could sense those inside staring at this alien whose head had slowly appeared over the edge of their latrine - yes, we had dug into the side of the dune directly below the pill box, and it was, in fact, their latrine. I wish I could say that I carried this confrontation off with a mustache-twirling bit of savoir-faire, with something witty such as, "Hi Schultz", but the gritty truth is that my muffled remark was, "Oh shit" as I slid back down the dune, still unaware of its contents.

Bill and I discussed this situation, just one more of the unknowns to crop up in the illustrious career of our Battalion. (He wrinkled his nose; I wrinkled mine; each of us thinking the other had become careless in the excitement of the past few hours.) Our decision was made easy by the German gunners walking out of their pill box with hands up, voluntarily surrendering for some unknown reason. Chief Causey, A-3, took action. Grabbing his weapon, a Tommy gun, he corralled these bewildered prisoners of war. He didn't quite know how to finish this off; he didn't really know what to do with them, so he marched them up and down this beach area just below the dune line. A bit of humor was now added. The Chief had grabbed his helmet in a hurry when he dashed off to make his capture. It was without a liner. In this mode, those helmets are used for buckets, for washbasins, etc. The equipment was never intended to be worn without a liner, but Chief Causey didn't want any monkey business to louse up his moment of glory, so refused to remove his liner less helmet, and provided a welcome bit of humor, cradling his Tommy gun in one arm while trying to hold his helmet on with the other, and trying to impress his prisoners with the authority of his position. He was great. We loved it.

It was now daylight. The firing from the gun emplacements behind the dunes, tanks having been added to the armament in the farmhouse and the canal toll house, stopped. Almost immediately we understood why. A heavily laden LST, loaded main deck and top deck with trucks also loaded, was slowly approaching the beach a short distance from where we had taken cover. They couldn't seem to understand our efforts to wave them off and get them to retreat from this area. It was a tragic mistake. Since we had landed we had tried to get word up to Red Beach to stop all incoming landing to Green Beach. Nothing worked in time to save this one. The German forces in the tanks, farmhouse, and canal house, deliberately held their fire until the LST had grounded, anchored, and opened the bow doors and let the ramp down. It was really a horrible sight. Before the first truck had started down the ramp the barrage began. The ship was literally torn to pieces, truck after truck hit, and caught fire. Then the shells began to pierce the hull, igniting fires and explosions on the tank deck. We could only lie there and watch. The only possible good to come of this incident was its obvious message to the Task Force Commanders, "Don't send anything else in here until you wipe out those gun emplacements behind the beach."

Green Beach was closed down immediately. The battalion elements were ordered to Red Beach and joined the forces there shortly after dark. Our Battalion Communications Officer, Orville Pence, and I were ordered to stay one more day to guard against the possibility of any strays heading towards the beach. We then joined the rest of the Battalion at Red Beach, before returning to our base at Karouba to wait for the "next one". Salerno is the one I will remember most vividly.

From the Beach Battalion point of view, the unloading at Red Beach ran very smoothly. But without our newly authorized equipment, proving its weight in gold on its very first outing, this could never have been true. Even though we were not confronted with an avalanche of mishandled small boats as we were in Sicily, we faced a new headache here. The British Eighth Army had been loaded for this invasion directly from their African bases. They had just completed their exhausting desert battles with the "Fox" - German General Rommel. Men and equipment were tired, worn out. As the unloading began this feature created an alarming situation. These beat-up trucks (petrol burning lorries) weren't able, in most cases, to get their rear wheels off the LST ramps - the front end stuck in the sand. Loading slowed to an almost total halt. Incoming traffic had to lie to offshore, at the mercy of aerial attacks and artillery fire from the German forces, who must even at this early stage. be amazed at how successful they were at stalling this combined American and British invasion force

Our DUKWS and bulldozers were quickly brought to the beach, positioned so that their winches could be attached to the British vehicle front ends. The winching-in usually let the trucks be pulled on to ground firm enough and level enough that they could be turned loose under their own power. The British higher ups frequently commented on the disaster that would have befallen them without the services of the Beach Battalion and their equipment. It should be remembered that for the first eight

or nine days, this invasion at Salerno was in serious danger of becoming a rout. Many of us will never know how many orders had been prepared ordering the invasion forces back to the beaches for evacuation from the beach.

As the landing forces were driven back towards the beach areas, Task Force leaders realized that drastic action had to be taken. This resulted in some of the greatest feeling of pride, admiration, and envy I have ever experienced. That night, and every night until the German forces were driven back, the biggies, our heavy cruisers, battleships, and the British Navy "Monitors", moved close to shore and lobbed a steady stream of shells into the positions of the German concentrations. This dangerous exposure of our ships to enemy shelling and bombing, and the equally exciting daytime action by our destroyers, went on for eight days. On D+9, the Task Force Commander pronounced "all beaches safe. Proceed with invasion orders". Two weeks later the beaches were closed and the small harbor at Salerno was made available for a limited amount of traffic until the badly sabotaged harbor at Naples could be cleaned out and some real unloading begun.

The Salerno invasion was a real butt-buster; dangerous as hell, but still exciting. Our little Beach Battalion contingent even got itself shelled by a German long-range battery in the ring of mountains behind the beaches. This shell (undoubtedly an 88mm since they ringed the mountains around the harbor), landed in what had been our chow line a few minutes before. Battalion personnel were scattered around in an orange grove, sitting on boxes, vehicles, stretchers, and the ground. Commander Eubank was slurping his down in his hammock, a short distance from the rest of us. When the shell landed the chow line was empty. A few of us took some shrapnel. All were flattened to the ground and lost in a dense fog of dirt, smoke, dust and fumes. But as befitting a seasoned veteran crew, we returned to our eating of what could be salvaged from our mess kits. Some Brass showed up a little later, inquiring as to how we were and "by the way, we thought we saw an explosion on the beach in this area - was there?" No one answered, we just pointed to the crater right next to us. Some heads-together discussion followed and then, "have to get back to the ship; good luck". And so the Battalion dispersed itself again, some to Naples, most back to Karouba, our North African Base in Tunisia. Salerno - our third assault landing, was now history.

I'll now turn my co-author pen over to Bud Vey to give you his impressions of Salerno, and then on to the next landing of the Battalion.

D-Day, Salerno - As I saw it... Author

As a follow up to Jack Elliott's graphic description of the first days at Salerno, I would be remiss not to briefly describe my own trials and tribulations during those first terrifying hours on the beach. Being young, 18 to be exact, and not privy to the "big picture" plans for this little beach excursion, I was totally unprepared for the distinctly nasty attitude demonstrated by the Germans in response to our landing there. Perhaps the terrifying sight of my 115 pound hulk, lugging a carbine, a Thompson sub-machine gun, and the .45 automatic strapped to my waist unnerved them to the point where they were unable to bring their arms to bear for several minutes, and after that, it was too late. By then I was at least three feet deep into the beach and rapidly taking on the characteristics of a sand crab. Had not one of our officers, Mr. Zellerbach, I believe, screamed something about "getting the hell out of here", I might well have wound up in the Guinness book of records as having dug a 50 foot hole in as many seconds. And all without benefit of an entrenching tool or helmet which were in position on my pack and head respectively. I can only surmise that I dug this fabulous hole with my little pinkies. I suppose that my abject terror was in reality a blessing, however, for when I leaped out of my "hasty defense position" to follow Mr. Zellerbach, I was shaking so violently that the best marksman in the German army could never have gotten a good bead on me. Compounding matters, I lost Mr. Zellerbach in the confusion as well as the rest of the "B" Company Headquarters gang with whom I went ashore. I did see Lt. McDavid, the Company Commander, and a friend, Bud Collins, for a brief moment, but then, like a will-o-the-wisp, they were gone. I like many others, spent the rest of the time trying to find out where the hell I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing.

Two incidents did occur that will remain forever etched in my memory of those first hours on the beach; first, some type of shell hit a truck in front of me on the beach and some part of the debris from the wreckage, I believe it was a tire, inconsiderately knocked me flat on my keister. I of course thought that I had bought the farm or, at the least, taken out a lease on it, but on ascertaining that I was still intact with no visible missing parts, I proceeded (very rapidly) down the beach. Had I known that I was heading for Green Beach, where things were really getting uncomfortable, I would have probably just said the hell with it and went back into my "sand crab" routine, but not knowing that I was heading for the spot where others were trying to leave, I went on my merry way. It was then that I saw the fire. In the middle of the beach, in the din of the battle, sat a handful of Englishmen from the 5th British Beach Brick, making tea. They offered me a cup, or at least I think they did as the offer was made in a form of cockney English that I had never heard before (hell, I'd never heard any cockney English before), and I accepted, then I got the hell out of there. Who else but a bunch of crazy "Limeys" would take time out from the war to build a fire and cook a pot of tea, in the middle of an assault beach. The fact that one

of them nonchalantly said something about Tiger Tanks breaking through the beach line didn't seem to faze them a bit. It was teatime and as far as they were concerned the war would have to wait. Unbelievable!

Finally catching up with my Headquarters Group somewhere in the morning hours, we settled down to a more orderly routine and as Company "runner" my time was then spent running up and down the beach with instructions to the Platoons from the company Commander. One very vivid memory of that day was watching the ever-mounting number of dead British soldiers being placed in long rows in a hastily dozed out trench to the rear of the beach. Whether this was for burial or just a temporary resting place I don't know as I never got back to that section of the beach but it was most assuredly a sober and unforgettable sight.

As with all situations such as this landing, some personal tragedy occurs. In my case it was a friend, RM/lc Eugene Macken, who wouldn't have to worry about the next landing. He paid the ultimate price at Salerno when a DUKW in which he was riding hit a land mine on the beach. But again, as in the previous operations, casualties in the First Beach Battalion were amazingly few, lending even more credence to our unofficial title of the "Immortal" First Naval Beach Battalion. For fifty years now, it has been a never-ending source of amazement to me that an outfit of 450 men could make five combat assault landing on defended beaches, usually landing in the first three waves, and not suffer any more casualties than we did. Someone had to be looking out for us, and especially so since the British troops we landed with here at Salerno were being killed and wounded to the right and left, and among us. Many men looked to the sky those first few days, and it wasn't to spot enemy aircraft, it was to offer thanks and say AMEN.

While writing this account of First Beach Battalion operations, I have often wished that time and space were available to elicit one or more personal remembrances from each member of the Battalion for inclusion herein. After listening to the myriad stories which are told and told again at each of our annual reunions, I am convinced that the inclusion of such personal remembrances would certainly spice up this otherwise rather droll manuscript. Many of them of course would have to be "cleaned up" prior to printing, even in this day and age of HBO and Show Time language. I have noticed though, that the stories told in the hospitality suite during our reunion activities take on a decidedly spicier flavor when the wives are absent versus the times when they are present at the tellings. I have noticed too, and I suppose it's just human nature, that most of us remember the exciting times and the fun times as opposed to the more difficult and tragic times we encountered. I for one, have great difficulty, 50 years from the date of our landings, recalling specifics about the battles, the beachheads, and the tribulations we underwent, but I can recall most vividly the little excursions undertaken to procure beer, booze, or such other "niceties" as may have been available at any one given time.

And so the saga of the Salerno landings came to an end. Few of us will forget, however the screaming sound made by the landing gear fairings of a Stuka dive bomber in a strafing attack, or the whistle and thunder of the deadly 88mm cannon ringing the beachhead from the high ground around the bay, or the absolute bedlam of men and boats coming ashore in the dark of night to assault an enemy on an unknown beach. Boys grow into men rapidly in such an environment, and men grow into much older men. Hearth and home are never as sweet as they are when you're thousands of miles away from them, tired, wet and hungry, and contending with an enemy firmly entrenched in real estate which you were led to believe would be yours for the taking. Such was Salerno, and so ended that portion of the Beach Battalion saga.

Before closing the book entirely on Salerno. I should say here that this landing was my last one in Europe. The day we were to embark for the subsequent Anzio landings, I experienced some agonizing abdominal pains and was hauled off in the back of a 6X6 truck to an Army Field Hospital somewhere between Salerno and Naples where they lost no time in whacking out my appendix. Initially I was quite upset about not making the Anzio landing with the battalion but as time dragged by and the battalion was bogged down on the Anzio beachhead for a period of almost four months of continual shelling and its contingent frustrations, I was more and more thankful that the old appendix decided to pop on the day of embarkation. This was especially so since at that time we were able to go to both Salerno and Naples on liberty. I could relate untold stories about this period of time on the part of myself and others, but since these are strictly personal experiences and have no particular bearing on the operations of the battalion, I shall leave them unaccounted. Besides, I don't feel like getting my brains beat out at this late stage of the game. Suffice it to say that those of us who did not make the Anzio landing were kept well occupied during that period. Not only was the liberty enjoyable but it was many times educational. For instance some of us learned one sunny Sunday afternoon why the old folks sitting on the boardwalk at the beach in Salerno smiled and nodded when you strolled arm in arm down the boardwalk with some young Italian cutie. It was evidently traditional for young folks planning marriage to walk arm in arm on the boardwalk on Sunday afternoon. Upon learning this, in broken English from an Old Italian who had spent his youth in Brooklyn, the parties involved did the only gentlemanly thing open to them. They RAN! Of course had not these young ladies with the fabulous bodies and the raven hair been endowed with a nose which put Durante to shame, things might have been different. But the thought of spending the future with someone sporting a suspension bridge for a nasal appendage was just the impetus needed to send these stalwarts on their way, quickly. We saw the young ladies some weeks later, again on Sunday, on the boardwalk, strolling arm in arm with a couple of paratroops. I often wondered if those poor guys ever wound up with a bunch of little skydivers sporting gondolas above their upper lip. Oh well, " C'est le guerre".

Actually, as I remember it, I (and the rest of the Battalion Headquarters Group) stayed in Italy for the remainder of the time we were in Europe (until October of 1944). Since I was in the Battalion Headquarters Group at this time and there was little call for Yeomen on the assault beaches, I and most other members of the Group were assigned to the rear echelon for the landings in Southern France also. So as I mentioned above, Salerno was my last combat operation in Europe. For this reason, the remainder of this history, specifically the landings at Anzio and Southern France, has been authored by Jack Elliott, the Battalion Executive Officer. I feel devastated that Jack did not live quite long enough to permit me to hand him a finished copy of this work on which the two of us have labored to long and so hard.

ADDENDUM

By Robert B. White

February 2001

I should note that the above is all of this history I was able to obtain from the Navy files. If Lt. Elliott completed the history, it somehow got separated from the above. Four years later, in January 2001, in response to a second request, this time seeking personnel data, I received much more information. In this packet of data I obtained a second, very short history, written by John Payne, which concerned itself with the very beginnings of the "beach party" and how he found himself a member after returning from survivors' leave. But of even greater interest were some declassified operational orders. By their very nature these orders provided me with names, rank or rate, and company and platoon assignments of the entire battalion. Unfortunately, they covered only the Salerno and Anzio landings. More on this later.

From Bud Vey I learned that for the last 20 to 25 years there had been reunions; he said he would give my name to whoever was running the next reunion, but I never heard from them. Using the net, I just found the guy that ran the 1998 reunion; I'll be in touch with him soon. As with all groups of WW II veterans, our numbers are shrinking fast. Later info—I had found this man, Julius Sleder, by searching the 'net. I assumed he lived in or near Traverse City, Mich., since that was where the '98 reunion had been held. I wrote him on Dec. 2, 2000. On Dec. 23, 2000 I got an e-mail from Tim forwarding the obituary of Julius Sleder, who had died on July 21, 1999. Since my letter has not been returned, I hope someone forwarded it to whomever be will running the next reunion. Another obituary discovered by Tim turned out to be that of a Lieutenant by the name of William Seaman. I believe Lt. Seaman was Company Commander of "A" Company.

According to his history, John Payne was present at the Casablanca landings, but not as a member of the Beach Party. He was a member of ship's company on one of the transports, USS Hugh L. Scott, AP 43, which was torpedoed off the coast of Fedala on November 12, 1942. He returned to the US, got thirty days survivors' leave, and when he returned to duty he found his orders to the same group who had traveled as troops on the Hugh L. Scott. The group was now officially part of First Naval Beach Battalion, had just finished their training at Fort Pierce, and was to complete training at Little Creek, VA and Solomon's Island, MD. He discovered that things were different in the troops' spaces than he had been accustomed to as ship's company. The bunks were stacked seven or eight feet high (as I recall, either five or six bunks with minimum vertical space between). With no duties other than morning calisthenics and General Quarters drills, the troops were bored. Many of them were

seasick. They passed their time gambling, either dice or cards, both of which were illegal aboard ship. The Captain came down to one of the troop compartments, spotted the gambling, and appropriated the money for the Navy Relief Fund. A short time later one of the soldiers somehow got on the PA system and announced, "Now hear this, Captain, hear this! Kiss my dog-faced ass"! The Captain was furious; offered a reward for any clue leading to the culprit, but never discovered the criminal.

Our skipper was a Lieutenant Commander by the name of Eubanks. I remember a story I have told many times, and I know some of you have heard it, but I will repeat it now. It was shortly after we had arrived in Oran and, as part of the 40th Combat Engineers Regiment and part of the 45th Infantry Division we were required to make a march for the purpose of watching a demonstration on how an infantry squad can defeat an enemy pillbox. I recall the march as being at least 10 miles long, although in truth it may have been shorter. John Payne describes it as thirty miles; he may be right. But it was late June or early July in North Africa and we were in full battle gear. The line of march was long and of course as the Navy, outsiders, we were "Tail-end Charlie". Of course we were straggling. Suddenly a jeep bearing a General's star came roaring up from behind, passed us, and pulled in, forcing us to stop. The General then proceeded to give our Skipper a proper dressing down saying things like, "Major, this is unsatisfactory. This is without doubt the scruffiest group of soldiers I have ever seen. Get them to march more smartly". Our skipper waited until the general paused for breath, which took some time. When he got a chance he responded, "But sir I am not a Major I am a Lieutenant Commander, and these men are not soldiers, they're sailors and we are marching at the tail end of the column to the best of our ability". The general said only, "Carry on", tossed a salute, got back in his jeep and roared off down the column.

It was after this demonstration that General Patton gave one of his "cussin' speeches". By this time all of us, even the Navy, wore the Thunderbird shoulder patch of the 45th Infantry Division, and Patton told us that he expected that thunderbird patch to be the most feared emblem of the war. I can still see him with his pearl handled six-guns, striding back and forth before the Division.

My recollections of Fort Pierce are somewhat different, as well. When we got liberty we would walk across the bridge to the mainland. At the island end of the bridge was a bait shack, which doubled as a café. As I recall there was a counter with three or four stools. For a quarter (yes, 25 cents) you bought a bowl (a typical diner-type soup bowl) heaped with cooked shrimp, in the shell, and a bowl of cocktail sauce. I would usually have a bowl or two on my way to town. I suppose that's where I developed my liking for shrimp with cocktail sauce.

Not far from the mainland end of the bridge was a firehouse, and most evenings there would be a cribbage game going on. I often stopped to watch and chat with the

firemen. One night one of the players asked if I played; I admitted that I had never even seen the game before. Nothing would do but they teach me, over several evenings. I still enjoy the game, more than 50 years later.

Of course, I also remember the training. It seemed like a thousand trips to the beaches—why did the coxswains always seem able to find the sand bar that meant the boat couldn't quite make the shore, and they had to drop the ramp in the water instead of on dry land? Sometimes the water at the end of the ramp was only ankle deep. But sometimes it was deep enough to be scary, particularly since we were fully combat-loaded. My radio alone weighed 40 pounds. But I agree the band at reveille was interesting, to say the least.

I find nothing fundamentally incorrect in the story as told. But in operational deployment the Battalion of some 450 men, consisted of three Companies each broken into three platoons. Each platoon was assigned to a company of the Engineering Regiment; for the Sicilian invasion it was the 40th Combat Engineers Regiment, which was similarly dispersed within the 45th Infantry Division. Thus, in an operation, we were spread out into different ships, with beach objectives assigned in accordance with those of the Division, of which we were a small, but obviously important, part. In fact, in the Salerno invasion, my Company was not even assigned to the American 45th Division, but to the British 46th Infantry Division, whose Engineers were the 35th Beach Group. Both divisions were units of the British-American Fifth Army, commanded by U. S. Gen. Mark Clark. As pointed out, the Brits had come directly from participating in Rommel's defeat. I had the pleasure of meeting some of the famed Gurkha troops; in fact they were good people, friendly, and I'm glad they were on our side; they could do a lot of damage with their razor-sharp knives.

An interesting aspect of being part of the integrated British- American Fifth Army: The U.S. was just switching from "C" or combat rations to a completely different "five in one" ration. In theory each box contained complete rations, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for five men for one day. There were, of course, varied menus. Unfortunately, we were issued thirty days' rations, and they were all alike! I don't remember breakfast, or lunch, but to this day, I will not eat Franco-American spaghetti! The Brits had a similar, though longer-standing, problem—they were sick and tired of canned corned beef, which they called bully beef, which to us provided a welcome relief from spaghetti. We did a lot of trading of delicacies. They even liked the almost inedible hard chocolate bars—very nourishing, I'm sure, but I think they were mostly cocoa butter.

Another recollection that is tied directly to the fact that we were part of the British-American Fifth Army: One of the tasks of the Beach Battalion was operating the traffic control boat. The purpose of the boat was to ensure a steady flow of traffic in toward the beach and back out to the ships at sea. The boat was a 36-foot landing craft, an LCVP. The crew was made up of the coxswain, who ran the boat, a

Radioman, and a Signalman. Since the boat was too small to have facilities like a head it was necessary that we tie up to a larger craft occasionally. One time we tied up to a British LCM, 50-footer. While the rest of the crew went below to use the head I stayed with the boat. I got to talking to one of the British crewmen and asked what stores they were carrying. He said they were carrying NAAFI stores. When I asked what they were he described them; in the U.S. Navy we would have called them material for the ships service store. Cigarettes, soap, razor blades, and the like. The British got all that; in addition NAAFI stores provided the daily tot of rum for all hands and a weekly or monthly bottle of whiskey for noncoms and officers. At my request, he turned his back long enough for me to "liberate" a case of whisky, which turned out to be Vat 69 Scotch whisky. When the crew returned we castoff from the LCM in a hurry. There were three of us with 12 bottles of Scotch. We reasoned that we probably could not manage to keep all of it for ourselves, so we decided to allocate one bottle for our Beachmaster, one bottle for our Communications Officer, and one bottle to the Company Commander. There was method to our madness; the US Navy takes a dim view of liquor aboard a Naval vessel. The officers were now our accomplices. To this day I still don't like Scotch but I have to admit that particular Scotch tasted awfully good.

It is strange how memories fade, events get out of synchronization, and even battles fold in on one another. Bud Vey's memory of the Brits and their tea reminded me of a story I have told occasionally over the years. I, also, saw a group making their "cuppa", but it was at Salerno, not Sicily, and the group I saw never got to drink their tea; apparently they had built their fire directly over a land mine, which exploded, killing them all. This happened within 100 or 200 yards down the beach from me, and I'll never forget it. I'm quite certain it was at Salerno, simply because we had no Brits with us at Sicily. In his history, John Payne alludes to the same incident, but recalls only two Brits, and lays the blame on an unexploded Bangalore torpedo, not a land mine. The result for the British soldiers was the same.

Among the ships in the task force providing support to the transports and the landing force at Salerno was an assortment consisting primarily of cruisers, destroyers, destroyer escorts, and mine sweepers. One of the most interesting was a British ship called a Monitor. Its armament was similar in size to that of a battleship but it had only one turret with two 16-inch guns and they were used to good advantage at Salerno. One of the reasons we seemed to have difficulty holding on to the beachhead at Salerno was a very large German gun mounted on a railroad car and hidden in a cave in the mountains behind the beach. At random times they would run out, fire several rounds at the beach, which they had completely zeroed in, and then duck back into their cave. The British Monitor with its 16-inch guns apparently was the only vessel that could reach to wherever the cave was. This took awhile, but eventually they silenced that gun and we were able to continue our work with out further harassment from it. One vivid memory I have is of the sight (yes, sight) of a barrage of naval gunfire. You would see the flash as the guns fired, then hear the report, and then listen to as well as watch the projectiles arc overhead. They actually

glow green, and they sound sort of like a train going by. It was very comforting to know that they were from our ships and not "incoming".

Like Bud Vey, I, too was landed on the wrong beach at Sicily I recall that the transportation provided was an Army DUKW. There were about 10 or 15 of us in the back end of the DUKW driving along the beach when suddenly a German Stuka appeared. He was flying parallel to the beach for sometime and then began a strafing run. We piled out of the DUKW, some headed for the shore and some for the sand dunes. I headed for the sand dunes, and am well aware of how Vey felt when he was trying to dig a foxhole with no entrenching tool. He used only his hands, and so did I. I threw myself down and tried to present the smallest possible target. That was the first of several times I tried to crawl inside my helmet. It's surprising, how much you think that helmet will protect you, even though you know it is not impenetrable. When the plane had passed I discovered a line of bullet holes on either side of me. He just missed me.

Another thing I recall about Salerno—that was where I had my first, last, and only ride on a motorcycle. There was a Brit, a mine sapper, whose name I don't recall, who used to stop by the radio shack to chat. One day he showed up with a motorcycle, telling me that he thought mine sapping was too dangerous, so he had volunteered as a dispatch rider. We chatted for a while, and, upon learning that I had never been on a bike, he asked me if I would like to take a spin with him. I agreed, and off we went. We headed inland, away from the beach. Within five minutes he waved in a forward direction and said, "There's the Jerry line, right over there." Suddenly I realized that there were shots coming from "the Jerry line", and that they were directed at us! He did a quick 180, and we moved out smartly. I can't describe the difficulty in trying to get my entire body inside my helmet while holding on to the driver for dear life. I expected to reach the end of the war at any minute. We got away, stopped at a dump of captured enemy arms, and I picked up an Italian Beretta and a brand new German Luger, complete with holster and extra clip as souvenirs. We got back to the radio shack uninjured, and I have never been on a motorcycle since.

Through a combination of my efforts, many of which led me down blind alleys, and a lot of help from internet-wise Tim, I have reached a definite conclusion: the Naval Beach Battalions are the "orphans" of the U.S. Navy regarding recognition for a difficult job well done. Through most of the articles (and there aren't a lot of them) seems to run a common thread. Neither the Army nor the Navy seemed to know exactly what to do with us. When we were aboard a troopship, for example, we were classed as troops. Radiomen and Signalmen, being in short supply, were attached to Ship's Company and stood watches along with the crew while the rest of our group were passengers, with ample time to clean and check weapons, write letters home, and generally prepare for what ever was coming next. Combat operations reports mostly went through Army channels, which probably at least partially accounts for the fact that so little is available through Navy channels.

About that open-air head/latrine in Scoglitti—I thought I remembered a picture of it, and Pat found it. See Fig. 5. I had thought it was a six- or eight-holer, with spots to sit side by side and back to back, but as you can see, we all faced the same way, right there in front of God and everyone. Note that our uniforms were a set of coveralls—not very conducive to modesty.

In his narrative, Vey points out that we were indeed a motley-looking crew. Among our personal gear we had our normal Navy seabag and hammock. In addition we had what the army called a "B" (barracks) bag, which contained our army uniforms. Our army uniforms were standard Army issue except that each article had a stenciled U. S N. For insignia of rank our Navy rating insignia became Army stripes. In my case, as a Radioman second-class instead of my normal "crow", sparks, and two red chevrons my army uniform indicated that I was a staff sergeant. While we were issued standard Army uniforms, we lived almost entirely in our coveralls or fatigues. Except on liberty. On liberty we wore the uniform of the day, either whites or dress blues, and were happy to be recognized as sailors.

While based at Bizerte, a liberty schedule was maintained. Although the Communications section of our platoon all rated liberty (a ride to Tunis in the back end of an army truck called a "six-by-six") together, the lead Signalman, Christ Pete Xigogianus, and I usually elected to take our turns at liberty separate from the rest of the gang. Not because we didn't get along with them, but out of a sense of responsibility. Someone had to take care of them when they got back to the base somewhat the worse for wear, and we elected ourselves to the task. A couple of them tended to become somewhat belligerent after a few drinks. In fact, one RM3/c got out of hand one night and butted his head through the sheetrock inner wall of our Quonset hut before we could restrain him.

Another liberty story—I don't recall how I met him, but I knew a businessman in Tunis. He owned a tannery, in the heart of the Kasbah. He hoped to come to America after the war, and was anxious to learn English. I was interested in learning French, so every time I got liberty I headed for his place. On a Saturday afternoon there was usually a group of men in the office. He got rid of them, very unceremoniously, then broke out his only bottle of Canadian Club, because "I was the only one who could appreciate it". He poured me one shot, filled his glass of wine, we clinked glasses, "Cheers" from him, "A votre sante" from me, and we spent a couple of hours both learning and teaching languages. I don't know if he ever got to this country; I lost track of him.

Like Vey, I left the battalion just prior to embarking for the Anzio invasion, but for a different reason. I had orders to return to the US, and to report to Cornell University, with authorization for air transport (with a very low priority—practically anyone could "bump" me) and allowance for thirty days leave en route. I went by train to Oran, flew (my first airplane ride, by C-47) from Oran to Gibraltar to Casablanca. At that time the only air crossing was the famous Pan Am Clipper, and with between

low priority and bad weather I didn't have a prayer. I paced the docks at Casablanca, looking for someone, anyone, to get me home. By the time I got orders to a ship most of my leave time had disappeared, but I got to Norfolk, and had a few days at home.

My gear (seabag and hammock) had been left behind in Oran, so all I had with me at Casablanca was my ditty bag, with shaving gear, a change of skivvies, and a pair of socks. Luckily, I had kept my army mackinaw, because it was the only warm article of clothing I had when I arrived back in the States. Believe it or not, I had a serious run-in with a Shore Patrol character on the train from Norfolk to New York. We had quite a scrap---he considered me out of uniform, despite the big USN stenciled on the back of the coat. Needless to say, I lost, since the uniform of the day for liberty was dress blues, peacoat, and flat hat. But as soon as he was out of sight I put my mackinaw back on.

Somewhere, probably on the base at Oran, someone had sliced open my seabag, and my precious Luger, obtained at great peril during the only motorcycle ride of my life, was missing. The Beretta, being old and kind of ugly, came through.

This brings my portion of the history to a close. I suppose I should have sat down and organized it more, but if you don't mind the fact that I skipped back and forth some, I think it tells you all at least some of my experiences in the First Beach Battalion. To the best of my recollection, almost sixty years later, it is factual.

Enjoy.

ADDENDUM

Amphibious Training Base in Fort Pierce Florida. 5 March 1997

Figure 1

Figure 2
Memorial at the St. Lucie Historical Society Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida. 5 March 1997

Figure 4
Himself

Figure 3
Radiomen and Signalmen of our platoon, in camp at Fort Pierce.

Figure 5
… we all faced the same way, right there in front of God and everyone.