

07/20/2005

Capture Living History - Nick Hale, five-inch shells and frozen food

By Carl Kelly

Part three of a continuing series. The first action that PFC Nick Hale saw in World War II (WWII) was the D-Day landing in June 1944. Hale was late getting into the war because of his age. He had wanted to join right after Pearl Harbor, but his father insisted that he finish high school. So, he waited, going to the movies every Saturday to see the Movietone News and to get the latest on the war.

"It was a different time," he remembered. "In World War II people were ashamed to not be in the military. People who were turned down physically often went to their family doctor and said, "Can you fix it? Tell me how to get through the physical?."

So, in 1943, as soon as he finished high school in Baltimore, Ma., Hale joined the Army. He was sent to basic training in Texas, then for some specialized training, and finally the Army put him on a troop ship and sent him to England.

"Troop ships are no fun," he said, "because you're bunked five high, and the guy on top always gets seasick. Several of us took our stuff up on deck and slept there."

A few months after landing in England, he was on a ship again. This time he was headed for France, Omaha Beach, as part of the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division, and the D-Day landing.

"We practiced getting off the troop ships, climbing down cargo nets, and getting into these landing crafts. The landing crafts were small, rectangular, steel boxes with a drop down ramp on the front. We hoped the landing craft would get in and drop the ramp on the beach rather than in deep water.

"As it turned out none of the landing craft that we saw got on the beach. On the other hand, they didn't land in



Bill Schiller, left, interviews Nick Hale regarding his World War II service. Hale, A D-Day veteran, described the "strange feeling" when a five-inch shell flew over his head as he lay on Omaha Beach.

six feet of water."

Hale was part of the 18th Regiment that landed about three hours after the first men hit the beach. He remembered sloshing through the water: "In the water above your knees, you can't do anything but get through the water. You can't be shooting. You can't dodge. All you could do is try to get up on that sand as quickly as possible.

"We were getting some artillery fire, some mortar fire. We saw a few bodies floating. On the beach we saw a lot of medics who were treating casualties. There was no way to evacuate people at that time. The medics did the best they could to treat them and they just stayed there until they could be evacuated."

The Germans had mined and booby-trapped the beaches, and above the beaches they had placed concrete pillboxes armed with machine guns and artillery.

"We had a Naval destroyer firing five-inch shells over our heads. They knocked out some of the pillboxes. We didn't have forward observers from the Navy there, but they were spotting from the ship and firing over our heads.

"When a shell goes over your head there's a sharp crack as it goes through the air," Hale described. "It's not a very big crack when it's a 30 caliber rifle bullet, but a five-inch shell really makes a noise, and when you're lying down on the ground with a light pack on, you feel the pack rising up when the shell goes over. You hear the crack and you feel your pack rising. It's a very strange feeling."

"There was a great deal of chaos on the beach," he remembered. "We knew we couldn't stay on that beach. No matter how many shells went overhead, no matter how many mortars were exploding around you, get off the beach. So, we got off." The Americans pushed inland.

Hale also spoke of the C rations and K rations. "We all hated them," he said. "But, you ate whatever you could get." He spoke of a time during the next winter when they were backing away from the front and ran back through the camp they'd left a few days earlier.

"When we ran through this kitchen area, we grabbed a couple cans. We stopped about a mile back and we looked to see what we had, baby lima beans and dehydrated ground beef. All the stuff was frozen. So we opened the cans. We'd take a knife and dig into the frozen lima beans and put it in your mouth for a while till it warmed up then chew it a little bit. With the dehydrated ground beef we did the same thing but kept it longer till the saliva hydrated it a little and it tasted like something that you want to eat."

Battle hardened, the 1st pushed on through France toward Germany. Nick Hale finished with war in Germany, and despite the food, he stayed with the Army until he retired in 1975 as a colonel.

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