

# 300th Quarterly



**300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers June 19 2014**

**Remembering and honoring the men of the 300<sup>th</sup> ECB, Navy crew and Navy medics lost or injured 70 years ago in the sinking of LST 523 on 19 June 1944.**

On 18 June 1944, LST 523 left England crossing the English Channel to land at Utah Beach in a continuation of Operation Overlord and the Normandy Invasion. On board were 200 men of the 300<sup>th</sup>, 145 Navy crew and 40 Navy medics. After anchoring off Utah Beach for several hours with dozens of other LSTs waiting out a terrible English Channel storm, LST 523 weighed anchor at 1310 on 19 June to go ashore. At 1315 an explosion blew the ship in half. The ship had hit an underwater German mine and sank instantly. Nearly 200 Engineers and Navy men lost their lives in that instant and another 100 were seriously injured. This may have been the single greatest loss in a single incident in the entire Normandy Invasion. What follows are the accounts of two men of the 300<sup>th</sup> of the events on that terrible day.

Homer Garrett was Supply Sergeant of Co. A. James Kennedy was a Tec 5 in H&S Co. Homer Garrett never returned to the 300<sup>th</sup> due to his severe injuries. He now lives in Tyler, Texas and attends every reunion of the 300<sup>th</sup>. James Kennedy rejoined his unit for the remainder of the war. He passed away less than a year after we recorded an interview with him three years ago at a 300<sup>th</sup> reunion.



**Chuck Bice will again arrange for the annual reunion of the 300<sup>th</sup> in Tyler, Texas. The reunion will be Friday-Sunday October 3-5. All are invited so set aside that weekend. Details with the next Newsletter.**

This drawing was made by Navy artist Tracy Sugarman at the very time of the rescue efforts of LST 523. Sending home the drawing to his wife he said, "Young men dying seems to me, somehow the greatest tragedy. The acceptance of death is something new to me. And I know that death serves only to accentuate the love of living we both share so dearly." Tracy Sugarman became a noted artist, illustrator and author publishing his last book shortly before his death at 90 years in 2013.

## **James Kennedy**

In England, I agreed to spar with Chief [Johnnie Watashe]. He was the heavyweight Golden Gloves champion of Oklahoma so he had some privileges. Chief took good care of me. He was my buddy. We both were in Headquarters and Services Company. Every morning we would box until reveille. I weighed only 150 pounds and he weighed about 220 pounds. I would run for about 30 minutes every day so I could just keep out of his way. I was much faster than he was and I could sting him every now and then. He would get to me when my arms were down and he would start hitting me. If I hit back he ignored me and kept hitting me. He didn't hurt me during all that time. I could hit him as hard as I wanted to at any time. That was the relationship we had. In June, when we loaded on the LST to go to France, Chief and I got on together along with other men of the 300<sup>th</sup>.

## **Homer Garrett**

Then there was that danged boat [LST 523]. I went up into the bow and just sat still. Later, I went below and a voice told me, "Stay out of there." I got out and went back on top. There were some tanks below and some of the boys slept in them at night. The next morning we stopped out there. There were three lines of LSTs and we were in the middle. We were all stopped [off Utah Beach in Normandy]. We were broadside to the beach and did they ever shell us. I was scared. That was the first time I'd seen war. One LST pulled out and went around and I thought, "I hope there are not any mines out there." The water was the coldest and the wind was blowing stormy weather at high tide. It was terrible. It was rough with that flat bottom boat. Just like a tub being in it. Up and down, up and down, up and down.



Tracy Sugarman's drawing of small rescue boat on 19 June 1944.

I went down in there one time and got Vaughn [John C.] out of there. I told him to get out of there and up on KP. I said I needed somebody to help me. He didn't want to go up but I threatened him with his life. Vaughn was a very good friend of mine. He got up there. He was upstairs on KP when we were hit and he never got a scratch.

## **James Kennedy**

The Channel crossing was crowded and rough due to a severe squall. As we approached land, we hit a mine. I was wounded with a six inch head wound and my knee was injured so I was unable to stand. The head wound put so much blood in my eyes that I could not see to climb the ladder to the deck. Chief said, "Kennedy's hit, let's get him out!" He pushed me up the ladder, placed me into a seat and someone lowered me into a small boat. While I was in the small boat, I heard someone shout, "Don't jump, don't jump!" I must have passed out because I didn't hear or see anything else until I was on a cot stretcher stacked above a jeep and remember nothing of the boat ride to the hospital in England. Chief saved my life. *(Johnnie Watashe was killed in action that day giving his own life to save others.)*



### **Homer Garrett**

When that mine hit us, it blew that thing half in two. And it parted two ways. I knew the water was coming up. That voice kept telling me, "You're all right. Take your time and don't get excited, get on that rail." I held that rail with both hands. When we got hit, I went straight up. I didn't know anything. I guess it must have knocked me unconscious. The water came up over us and a lot of us came to. That water was the coldest, blowing, high tide and it was rough as it could be. I was on the part that was sinking. I didn't know what was on the other end. I just knew the water was coming in. The voice said, "Take your time." It sounds a little ridiculous about the voice but it absolutely happened and if I ever hear it again, I will heed it.

### **James Kennedy**

I was in the hospital 10 days before being discharged with many packages of Sulfa (sulfanilamide) to continue redressing my head wound. I was placed on a tug boat with another soldier and the tug captain. The boat was loaded with blankets piled high. It made the ride more comfortable. It was a 10-hour crossing to France. Upon arrival in France, I reported to a Replacement Depot and was told I would be assigned to the Infantry where needed. I wanted to go back to my engineer unit. I watched vehicles passing on the road and saw a 300<sup>th</sup> Engineer truck go by. I stayed there beside the road all day and late that evening when they came back I flagged them down and went with them to C Company. The First Sergeant and the Captain seemed to want me in their Company. I was considered AWOL so they worked with Major Crandall to clear me of AWOL since they were undermanned. Once in Belgium, Major Crandall finally

cleared me of the AWOL charges. I next went to Spa, Belgium where I was cross-trained as a radio operator. I remained in C Company until the end of the war.

### **Homer Garrett**

I got my pelvis bone broke in two places, cracked right ankle, two ribs cracked, jaw broke, every tooth was broke. I was in pretty bad shape. I don't know how I ever survived all that. A little boat picked me up and he looked at me and put me right up in the front and laid me down. They had a plastic rain coat folded up and they put my head on it and the whole back of my head, skin and hair just came up. And there was a puddle of blood where I was laying and I said, "What's the use?" - and passed out. The next thing I knew was they were putting me in a basket and they were lifting me out and on to a destroyer. I got a lot of attention on that destroyer. They were so nice to me. I thought I was the luckiest man in the world. I was in and out of hospitals for ten months in England and the States.

The worst thing that ever happened to me in my life was when I got injured. It was on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July that they tried to set some bones. They didn't put me to sleep or nothing. They said they'd like to but had run out of anesthetic. It was a torturous thing if ever there was one. Even though I got wounded, I would do it again. I might not want to but I would do it. If I was called out to go I would want the same bunch I went with. The real heroes of the war were the boys that didn't come back. I lost more than half of my squad. Some from Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma. We didn't go by where they were from. They were first class people - really good guys.

### **Don Richter recalls 19 June, 1944**

*Cpl. Don Richter, Company Clerk, should have been on LST 523 when it went down. He was replaced at the last minute and stayed in England when LST 523 left for Normandy. Don remained with the 300<sup>th</sup> throughout the war. He continues to live in his home town of Leroy, Texas near Waco and has contributed to the 300<sup>th</sup> web site as the now official historian of the 300<sup>th</sup>. Here is his account of the days following 19 June 1944.*

When my squad went across to France on June 19, I was at Group HQ at the "Green House" to answer the phone. Everyone was gone and we were to give a message that would seem that everyone was still in England. It was on June 19 or 20 that we received a disturbing notice that the Second Echelon had been on an LST [523] that had sunk off the Normandy coast and many of the men were lost. I was in shock over the likely loss of some of my buddies. Turned out that several were killed while more were wounded and only a few reached the beach unharmed.

At last, on June 27, we finally left England as part of the Third Echelon moving out to go across the Channel landing on the Normandy beachhead without incident. I helped in

preparing casualty lists as information came in regarding the LST sinking. I performed the sad task of doing the extensive casualty reports on those lost... KIA, WIA and MIA. That's when I mourned the loss of men like Orville Galloway and especially my very best buddy Joe Leyva who, in Camp White, took care of my needs, including replacing my bed roll when it was stolen by "requisitioning" bedding from other tents. I remember my beloved tent buddy, Joe, without whom I would not have survived Army life. He took this very young Texas kid and helped him grow into a man in a very short time. What a loss. I thought about Marvin Livingston who had taken my place on LST 523 and later learned he survived without a scratch.



**300<sup>th</sup> Quarterly** is a newsletter for and about the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers in WWII and their families and friends.

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