

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 19, 2009

The Real Heroes: From 1942 until 1946 I was in the Army Air Force, but in no way was I a hero. After the war nearly all young men my age had been in the service (many of them took advantage of the GI bill, allowing them to further their higher education). Veterans of World War II were everywhere; it was no "big deal." However, I have known at least four *real heroes*. Two survived the war; two did not. Here is the story of one of them.

When I went to Mercersburg Academy in 1941, my roommate was John K. Chapman of Broadalbin, New York, who had been at Mercersburg since the 9th grade and was a "big man on campus." He was a good athlete, a member of the student body's "senate," and president of the Washington Irving Society. This latter position was equaled only by the President of the John Marshall Society, Irving's competitor. All Mercersburg students had to belong to one or the other, and friendly in-house contests were held throughout the year, culminating in a great debate in late February. John and I enjoyed each other, and we both served during World War II, but so did everyone else, and at reunions and the like, no one discussed his wartime service. It was not until very recently that I learned John had been just off the Normandy beaches on D-Day, June 6, 1944!

From his daughter, I have been able to learn the following: John was with a Medical Unit assigned to go ashore with the first wave of infantry and artillery, and they sailed on LST #314 from Portland-Weymouth Harbor on June 4, only to return because of rough seas. The next night the invasion was on, and as they crossed the channel, ships of all sizes were everywhere. About 2 A.M. just off shore at a beach called Omaha Red, troops were being loaded onto Higgins boats (the actual landing craft). Each LST carried six Higgins boats. The bombardment started about 4 A.M. John and his friend Jim Averill, knowing that they might witness history in the making, went up to the superstructure of their LST to take in the sights, as no casualties had come to them as yet. The Higgins boats were unloaded into the water at daybreak. Many of them sank before reaching shore; the seas were rough, their loads were too great, and their pumps couldn't keep up. By late morning, the casualties started arriving; most injuries coming from rifle wounds. Several bodies of men who never reached shore were turned over to them. The original plan had been for the LST to land on the beach, but the sea was too rough, and it would have been suicide.

After what seemed like a very long time, the LST headed back to England with its casualties. As soon as the boat was unloaded, it started back to Normandy with an Army Maintenance Outfit (trucks and drivers) and was accompanied by four other LST's and a Destroyer-escort. About 15 miles off the coast, LST #314 was torpedoed by a German E-boat (similar to our PT boats). In a few minutes the LST began to sink, and fire and explosions followed. The German E-boat pulled alongside and prepared to continue shooting, but for some unknown reason, they sped off and threw off a life raft. As John's ship sank, he tried to swim away in the icy water, but the suction of the ship going under made it impossible to make headway. Slightly injured, he caught up to a life raft and was able to climb aboard. Those who had not drowned were picked up by a British ship and taken back to England, and John soon returned to the states to recuperate. He took part in several of the Pacific island campaigns before the war ended and he was discharged. I knew a real hero. Ruth and I had dinner with the Chapmans during our week at Saratoga Springs in July.