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*Letters from the Communications Zone: Lt. Edwin Best in the  
Second World War*

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Arts in History

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by  
Jeremy Cobb  
August, 2006

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Dr. Colin Baxter

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Edwin Best, Normandy, D-Day, Letters

ABSTRACT

*Letters from the Communications Zone: Lt. Edwin Best in the  
Second World War*

by

Jeremy Cobb

The subject of this paper is the experiences and observations of Lt. Edwin Best of the 618<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Ammunition Company from 1943 until 1946. This includes time in the United States, England and France.

The primary sources for this paper include letters home from Lt. Best and an oral history transcript. Secondary sources have been used to place Lt. Best into the overall context of the war.

He made keen observations regarding the level of training before D-Day, comparisons of life in England and the US, from the "communications zone" in Normandy, as a temporary Judge Advocate General officer, and finishing the war in Southern France.

Though he may not have been on the front line, or in an HQ, his comments are valuable to the historical record.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to those giants who came before and upon whose shoulders we now stand.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Lynn Brown and Edwin Best Jr. for allowing me to use the letters in their possession. My thanks to Dr. Stephen Fritz and Dr. Ronnie Day for persuading me to take on this project and providing ample help along the way. I would also like to thank my parents, sister, and close friends for listening to my ramblings on the subject.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of views of and impressions from the Second World War come from the generals, fighter pilots, frontline infantrymen, or sailors involved. There were many more, though, whose job was just as important. The ordnance units, those that supplied the frontline troops with their much-needed ammunition, and all the while in harms way, have been underrepresented by historians in their effort to piece together the reality of World War Two. This particular view of the war comes from an ordnance man named Edwin Jones Best.

Edwin Best was born on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1914, in Greenback Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> He began his schooling, like many in rural east Tennessee, in a small one-room schoolhouse learning the basics. He quickly advanced to larger schools, earning his high school diploma from the Greenback Public School System in 1932. The young Edwin Best received a well-rounded, classical education at Maryville College from 1932 until 1936, when he graduated. He applied, and was accepted, to further his education at Vanderbilt University. In the summer months before moving to Nashville, he took a temporary job with the Tennessee Valley Authority. As it turned out, this job would not be quite as temporary as he thought, as he eventually spent thirty-nine

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin J. Best. Oral history transcript, (New Orleans, University of New Orleans, 1992), 1.

years in the employ of the TVA. His time at the TVA was interrupted a few times, both by his pursuit of graduate work at Harvard, and his involvement in World War Two and Korea.<sup>2</sup>

His military training had already begun while he was at Maryville College. He began his military service in 1932, preparing to be a horse cavalryman, but his active duty status was put on hiatus until after the United States became involved in World War Two. He went back to the army as a Volunteer Officer Candidate, being inducted on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1942. The next day he was sworn in at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Hoping to become assigned to the engineers he went through basic training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, which was the Engineer Replacement Training Center. However, his eyesight was not deemed good enough for the engineer corps and he transferred to a new service within the army.<sup>3</sup>

Edwin Best was accepted to the Ordnance Officer Candidate School at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. After completing officer training he received his commission as a Second Lieutenant on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. A note was attached to his letter of commission stating that "this appointment is for non-combatant duty with supply services only by reason of poor

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin Best. *A Place Called Greenback: An East Tennessee Town at the Turn of the Century, 1870-1917*. (Maryville, Tennessee, Byron's Graphic Arts, 1993), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Best, Oral Transcript, 1.

vision." The newly minted Lt. Best found this very ironic while under fire just shy of a year later in France.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, Best soon found himself assigned to the 618<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Ammunition Company. Along with this assignment began the adventure of training, travel, and combat chronicled by Lt. Best in letters to his wife, Lynn Ann, as well as in a later oral history. Although based almost exclusively on these primary sources, this thesis is an attempt not merely to allow Edwin Best to tell his story but to place it in the larger context of World War Two as it played out in Western Europe. Even though his is not a tale of front line combat, it is nevertheless an authentic, if often overlooked, chronicle of one of the many indispensable men in the support units stationed just behind the main battle line. As with most GI's, Lt. Best had an ambivalent feeling about war and his role in it, yet as his letters illustrate, it was, for him, the experience of a lifetime.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 2

### OVER HERE AND OVER THERE

The shore bombardment beginning in the predawn hours of June 6, 1944, was throwing up sand, dirt, and smoke, which could clearly be seen by the men anxiously approaching the Norman coast in their dangerously exposed landing craft. The men of the 618<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Ammunition Company were about to put their training to the test. They had been preparing for this day for almost a year. In reality, this story does not begin on the beaches of Normandy but rather in the hills of western Kentucky where the men of the 618<sup>th</sup> had received their training.

The unit originally was split into two groups. Lieutenant Edwin Best stayed with one group in Kentucky while the other went to Florida for amphibious training. Letters to his wife in October of 1943 are revealing about the training they received. He was quite worried about the level and quality of preparation his unit was receiving in Kentucky. Lt. Best was afraid that it was going to be inadequate when they saw combat for the first time. This was mostly due to what he perceived as the poor quality of the men assigned as their commanders. In his letters of October 1943, Lt. Best spoke of "hounding Majors" making him fill out endless paperwork as opposed to working with his men. More often he spoke of the commanding officer, Colonel Peak. The

Colonel was a "crotchety old West Pointer" whose classmates had long ago made General. These officers, Best complained, were more interested in military discipline than proper training. At any given point only half of the men were training for their jobs within the unit while the other half were assigned to either guard duty or other miscellaneous duties of little consequence. Those men who stayed in Kentucky during the fall of 1943 might have been underprepared in the eyes of Lt. Best but there was little time to worry about it.<sup>5</sup>

Specific unit training would have involved much classroom time. Lectures would have been given on proper handling of munitions, both American and foreign. There would have been familiarization courses with handling enemy munitions and disposing of them. Field exercises would have involved transferring munitions to the troops just as they would in the communications zone while in France.

This should not be taken as an overall indicator of stateside training. It should only be taken as an observation about this particular unit; and even then only the section of Best's unit that stayed in Kentucky. The recently popular *Band of Brothers* depicted strenuous training. The men of E company, 506<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment were confident of their training. Their constant calisthenics and running up the hill

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best of October 1943, Private Collection.

known as Currahee prepared the men physically. In addition, the constant drilling by their commanding officer, Captain Herbert Sobel, brought them together as a unit. Though he was effective in training the men in his command, many considered him a poor leader because he lead with fear.<sup>6</sup>

It was not just the company commander who was hard on the men in training though. Major Strayer, the commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, insisted on long, hard, and realistic training. On Thanksgiving, 1942, he set the battalion on a two-day field exercise. It included not only the standard long marches but also mock attacks and defensive drills, living off k-rations in the field, and the "Hawg Innards Problem." The latter included the troops crawling under barbed wire while machineguns fired over their heads. What made this notable was the fact that the entrails of hogs were spread about under the wire. This made for a very memorable two-day exercise.<sup>7</sup>

Strenuous and realistic training was not just reserved for the elite. In divisional training the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry division strove for similar preparation to the airborne. In addition to the realistic training at an operational level, involving simulated explosions and machinegun fire while doing urban operations, supporting units were stressed as well. Artillery

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992), 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

units trained to fire on their own initiative and then in coordination with other artillery units in large scale divisional exercises. The Regimental Combat Team training improved combined arms actions between infantry and artillery.<sup>8</sup> The culmination of this divisional training came in Louisiana. The 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry division, in addition to two other draftee divisions, performed in maneuvers against the 31<sup>st</sup> "Dixie Division" in June of 1943. Being out in the field was a significant training tool. They gained the experience of living in the wild, many of the troops for the first time. The smaller scale training of the previous months also came into play when, as part of the exercise, the 88<sup>th</sup> Division fell back. Instead of everyone falling back, however, a detachment stayed behind and reported on enemy movements while escaping and evading detection. This was an innovative tactic for the time that would later be used in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Even larger scale training operations were also performed before the troops went overseas. In the hills of Middle Tennessee the terrain is somewhat like that of Western Europe. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army would come to train in those hills. These maneuvers lasted from June of 1942, off and on, until September of 1944. The stated goal was to "toughen men for dirty work," according

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<sup>8</sup> John Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in WWII*. (Lexington, The University of Kentucky Press, 1986), 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

to Lt. Gen. Ben Lear. The high command viewed these maneuvers as dress rehearsals and the capstone of the previous training the divisions had gone through. These actions involved many divisions, air support, logistical problems, foreign observers, civilians displaced and involved, new tactics developed, and even some deaths due to training accidents. This was the closest the men would get to combat without actually being there.<sup>10</sup>

Though Best's comments in his letters regarding training were limited mostly to the activities conducted in Kentucky, in a later oral history he mentioned that he was on the maneuvers in Middle Tennessee during the summer and fall of 1943.<sup>11</sup> These activities, however, were more likely to have been part of a training regimen associated with the Chemical Corps rather than a front line unit. Those going through Chemical Warfare School did not undergo the same strenuous combat training as others but were subjected to a more rigorous classroom situation with limited field exercises. Because both the Chemical Warfare Specialists and the men of Ammunition Ordnance units were situated in the communications zone, rather than the front line, the two are often regarded as analogous.<sup>12</sup> It was still extremely worrisome, however, for a man who is supposed to be right on the

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<sup>10</sup> Eugene Sloan, *With Second Army, Somewhere in Tennessee*. (Clarksville, Tennessee: Tennessee World War II Commission, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> Best. Oral history transcript, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Chemical Corps Association, *The Chemical Corp in World War Two: A Report on Accomplishments*. (New York, Reinhold Publishing Co. 1948), 101.

line, if not at its point, to receive little to no extra combat training. Such anxieties likely motivated Lt. Best's complaints in letters to his wife of the alleged inadequate training and preparation of his unit for actual combat.

The tone of these early letters from Kentucky was quite different from that of similar British documents. Best showed no concern for the immediate moment but rather expressed a generalized fear of the unknown. There were, for example, no worries about air-raids or any imminent danger of invasion, as often appeared in similar European sources. A 1940 British pamphlet described the procedures for an air-raid in great detail. It went so far as to tell civilians to clear the upper floors of anything flammable to lessen the fire risk.<sup>13</sup> Germans on their home front also had a very different experience and reality of war. At the very beginning of the war Victor Klemperer wrote of blackouts and being miserable while hiding in the cellar, presumably to protect from bombing raids.<sup>14</sup>

Despite Best's persistent qualms, in December of 1943 the 618<sup>th</sup> began the move toward Europe. Christmas was spent in New York City. This was Lt. Best's first opportunity to reminisce about trips he and his wife had made to the city before their life was "so suddenly interrupted." New York wasn't quite the

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<sup>13</sup> Sir John Anderson, *The Home Front: Protection Of Your Home Against Air Raids*. ed. Jon Lewis, *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness World War II*. (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years 1933-1941*. Martin Chambers trans (New York, Modern Library, 1999), 306.

same bustling city during the winter of 1943 that he remembered. Lt. Best wrote marveling at how quiet it was in New York compared with his earlier trips to the city. The majority of the stores were closed, so they stayed in quarters most of the time. The food drew comment as well. The quality was not what he had hoped, but at the least it was warm.<sup>15</sup> New York was just a brief stopover, though, as the first letter from Europe to Lynn Ann was penned in England on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

As with so many other GI's crossing, the Atlantic in winter proved less than enjoyable. Best's ship, the *Samaria*, was an old British liner that had been pressed into military service.<sup>16</sup> Like many who made the crossing, seasickness struck Best, although he claimed to his wife that the distress was only for the first day, and after that the "trip over was very pleasant."<sup>17</sup> Lt. Best later admitted that his experience was downplayed acknowledging in his oral history that it was a "rather rough crossing."<sup>18</sup> The danger associated with the crossing was also downplayed. Enemy submarines were a constant menace, with the danger ever-present in the minds of experienced sailors, even in late 1943. It was not uncommon for a convoy to be attacked. Of lesser concern during this time were German surface raiders and aircraft, but

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<sup>15</sup> Edwin Best, Letter to Lynn Ann Best, 24 December 1943.

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin Best, Letter to Lynn Ann Best, 12 January 1944.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 2.

they too were lurking.<sup>19</sup> Despite the discomfort and danger, the first elements of the 618<sup>th</sup> arrived at Liverpool on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944.<sup>20</sup>

In *Band of Brothers* the men of the 506<sup>th</sup> described in more depth the difficulties crossing the Atlantic that Lt. Best would have encountered. The liner they sailed on was small and over crowded, much like that used to transport the 618<sup>th</sup>. The men had little room to sleep, shower, and generally care for themselves. The absence of adequate hygienic facilities quickly produced a stench that began to overpower many aboard the ship. The food also left much to be desired. In some respects, though, the worst problem might have been simple boredom. After weeks and months of constant activity, the GI's now had little to keep themselves occupied. The only way many were able to pass the time was by various forms of gambling.<sup>21</sup>

Lt. Best did not stay long in Liverpool, quickly boarding a train and heading for Torquay as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Special Brigade of the Amphibian Command.<sup>22</sup> Lt. Best's first impression was that the English were a very "dignified and courteous" people. He soon began to roam the countryside on his time off. Being a well-read man he already knew a bit about British

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Carse, "Voyage To Murmansk, September 1942." ed. Jon Lewis, *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness World War II*. (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002), 134.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 42-43.

<sup>22</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 2.

history and the places he was visiting. He was most impressed by the cathedrals and noted that "the very pavement exudes tradition." Touring these churches took up the majority of his free time. He also attended concerts in town but hastened to assure his wife that he did not go to the pubs afterward.<sup>23</sup>

Along the same lines, the sights of England reminded the paratrooper Private Webster of E Company of a Hollywood set. He noted the thatched roofs and vines on their sides. The cobblestone roads and Norman churches also drew note. He described England as having a very welcoming feel about it.<sup>24</sup>

The landscape and weather impressed Lt. Best as well. Spring in England reminded him of spring in Tennessee. In May and June he did comment that it was getting dreary and rainy, much more so than in Tennessee. He was hoping to have a tan but the army didn't allow him to have "much bare arm time."<sup>25</sup> The countryside was of great interest as well. The spring flowers were quite beautiful in the rolling countryside. He was also impressed with the hedgerows in England.<sup>26</sup> Little did he know what the hedgerows of Normandy would bring three months later.

Lt. Best found the people of England pleasant as well. He stayed with the Chiswell family, where he roomed with another officer in their small house. They were a nice family and Best

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<sup>23</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 12 January 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, March to May 1944.

<sup>26</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 11 April 1944.

grew close to them over the few months he was billeted with them. In letters to his wife, Lt. Best admitted it would be hard to leave them. Mister Chiswell was a World War One veteran who had served in the Royal Flying Corps, while his son was currently serving in the RAF.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike many of his countrymen, Best consciously or unconsciously began to adopt some British habits. In a few of his letters, for example, he used British slang. He tried to adopt some English culinary traditions but, like most Americans, found English food rather bland.<sup>28</sup> Of course wartime put even more of a strain on the already bland English diet, for the British endured much stricter food rationing than did their counterparts in America. Many GI's thus lived on a diet of powdered milk and eggs, dehydrated fruits and potatoes, Brussels sprouts, and cabbage.<sup>29</sup>

Best's attempt to experience British life, coupled with his touring the countryside and delving into English culture meant his time in England was in marked contrast with that of many of his countrymen. They too used slang, but many had to learn quickly which words to avoid. Unlike Lt. Best, they frequented the pubs and became intimately acquainted with the female populace of England. Some English military men began to resent

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<sup>27</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, March 1944.

<sup>28</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, March 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 44.

the American presence. This resentment lead to the well known saying that Americans were "overpaid, oversexed and over here." The less well known counter was that the English were "underpaid, undersexed and under Eisenhower."<sup>30</sup>

This animosity developed in part because of the disparity in pay scale. While British privates earned \$2.82 a week, their American counterparts received \$13.84. A British Lieutenant earned \$67.42 a month while a comparable American officer was paid \$162.50. Given this pay disparity the reality of American spending habits and the over crowding caused by the American build-up in preparation for D-Day, tensions between the allied soldiers rose quickly. A GI, for example, was in the position of being able to spend much more money in local areas, and was especially prone to lavish this largesse on young women. In the eyes of British men, then, the Yanks were "stealing" their women away with the lure of material possessions they could not hope to match. When coupled with the steady supply from the United States of food, cigarettes, chocolate, and grooming items such as cologne, along with the snappy uniforms of the American Army, most British men believed they had the deck stacked against them when trying to woo female companionship away from the Americans.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade; The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945* (New York, Modern Library, 2005), 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

In common with other GI's, the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne went through classes designed to alert them to the situation and thus avoid some of the problems encountered by the first American arrivals in England. They were lectured in depth about British customs and manners. While in the small town the men remained quiet and well behaved, saving their rowdy nature for trips to London.<sup>32</sup>

Although an admirer of many things British, Best still viewed England as far from perfect. He lamented the lack of comforts that people saw even in East Tennessee. Central heat and indirect lighting were missed. The condition of English plumbing also drew comment. Toilets in particular were normally loud and caused embarrassment when the bathroom was used. He and a few other officers occasionally went to films as well. Many they saw were British made and regarded as "second class" in comparison to the films Hollywood produced. They much preferred the American movies and went to watch them whenever possible. The other thing missing were some small luxury goods found in the U.S.

Lt. Best often requested that his wife send various items every few weeks. The most popular items were hard candy, ink, writing paper, and above all else tobacco products. These items

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<sup>32</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 43.

either could not be found or were very expensive.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Lt. Best requested supplies reflected well the scarcity of everyday goods faced by the English. To illustrate, the British Army allotted one square of toilet paper per soldier while the US Army supplied twenty-two sheets.<sup>34</sup> The supply situation for German soldiers on the Eastern front is well known. It was a rare occasion that those on the German home front could spare sending anything more than a letter or that the military could ship it.<sup>35</sup> German civilians had it no better. By early 1941 Victor Klemperer was writing of friends sending him socks because his were threadbare.<sup>36</sup> Though Lt. Best had trouble finding some of the comforts of home, at least they could be sent over.

Money was on Edwin Best's mind often. He sent home quite a bit of his pay to his wife. Coming out of the depression, and unsure if he would be able to get his job at the Tennessee Valley Authority back after the war, building a "nest egg" for the future was foremost on his mind when it came to money. He didn't, however, send all of his pay home. He picked up a few gifts for his wife in England. In particular he was proud of a

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<sup>33</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, February to April 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Boy's Crusade*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Gottlob Herbert Bidermann, *In Deadly Combat : A German Soldier's Memoir of the Eastern Front* trans Derek S. Zumbro (Lawrence Kansas, University of Kansas Press, 2000), 133.

<sup>36</sup> Victor Klemperer *I Will Bear Witness*, 371.

teacup and bracelet that he was trying to send home. The main problem was finding packing material.<sup>37</sup>

At night, reading his letters and writing to his wife took much of his time up. Letters kept him in touch with everyone back home, easing the growing homesickness. His letters revealed an intense interest in both local and national political news, as well as the news of friends in the service elsewhere. One friend from Tennessee had gone to North Africa and, Best lamented, would probably return home a "bemedalled hero." More sobering, though, was the news that another friend had been wounded in action.<sup>38</sup>

Mail, or the lack of it, proved to be the source of his chief complaint. Best's Army Post Office number kept changing, so his letters from home took a long time to catch up or even get to him. It was so slow that "cologne loses its smell, as would Limburger cheese."<sup>39</sup> In addition to letters he subscribed to *Time* and *Stars and Stripes* and also read *The Times of London*. These were quite popular when they arrived, since they allowed Best to connect in a personal way to the larger event and purpose of the war.<sup>40</sup>

There were other things to read besides letters and periodicals however. Lt. Best was a voracious reader. He was

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, April 1944.

<sup>39</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 20 February 1944.

<sup>40</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, February to May 1944.

reading *A Cambridge History of English Literature* for the first two months in England. On a lighter note, he was also reading the comedic novel, *Life is a Putty Knife Factory*. Agatha Christie novels were also quite popular with Lt. Best. There were many more unnamed volumes mentioned. All of these were mailed home at the first opportunity.<sup>41</sup>

A second common complaint from Best concerned those back home who were "shirking their responsibility." Specifically he was referring to those who undeservedly got classified as 4-F. Those who had obvious exemptions were different. In this Lt. Best was in agreement with the vast majority of soldiers.<sup>42</sup>

Though he wrote mostly about leisure activities, with occasional gripes, Lt. Best did allude to military activities. On occasion he wrote of training out in the field. The pup tents didn't afford the same level of comfort as a bed in a warm home, but with his sleeping bag and overcoat it was not all that bad. Lt. Best spoke of the Warrant Officers as a "God send." They worked mostly on administrative duties so the officers could do more training.<sup>43</sup> The platoon that had left for Florida back in the summer of 1943 rejoined them in England. They had been training for amphibious operations. This training was shared

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<sup>41</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, February to April 1944.

<sup>42</sup> Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 6 March 1944.

with the rest of the company on the beaches of Devon and Cornwall during his five-month stay in England.<sup>44</sup>

The time of American combat units in England was taken up largely by training. Combat maneuvers, similar to those that had taken place in the United States, occurred with regularity. Much more time was spent outdoors, though, as combined arms training, long hikes, night operations, and close combat exercises prepared the men for the initiation into combat that was not too far away.<sup>45</sup>

An occasion of great joy was when Col. Peak departed the unit. A "rowdy party" closely followed his departure.<sup>46</sup> Still, despite his various diversions, Best never forgot why he and the other GI's were in England, as revealed by a comment in one of the last letters he sent before D-Day. On May 10<sup>th</sup> Best remarked that he "shouldn't be surprised if A. Hitler and Co. aren't slightly interested in what is going on over here on the tight little island."<sup>47</sup> Lt. Best was a fan of understatement. Less than a month after that letter, "A. Hitler and Co." would find out what the GI's had been up to.

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<sup>44</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 44.

<sup>46</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 2 February 1944.

<sup>47</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 10 March 1944.

CHAPTER 3  
INTO THE BREACH

Preparations for the "Day of Days" began long before June 6<sup>th</sup>. It was the day Americans in England had been training for, and their commanders intended to leave as little to chance as possible. In mid May, communications to and from home were very limited. Supplies had been stockpiled and loaded in anticipation of the landings. The 618<sup>th</sup> had prepared DUKW's,<sup>48</sup> amphibious all-wheel drive trucks, for the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which would make the landing at Omaha Beach. Everything had fallen into place

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the 6<sup>th</sup> Engineer Special Brigade left Torquay in the middle of the night. They headed to the staging area in Collington. The ammunition supply teams, one of which Lt. Best commanded, was made up of sixty men. Each team was divided in half, one commanded by the normal commanding officer and the second team by his executive officer. In this case it was Lieutenant Arthur Boynton. Life in the staging area was dull compared to the previous months of training and practice. April saw the last paycheck for some time. The troops were given two hundred French Francs for use after the invasion. Gum, cigarettes, and candy were normally used as barter instead of

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<sup>48</sup> DUKW was a manufacturers code for a military vehicle designed in 1942 (D), amphibious (U), all wheel drive (K) and had dual rear axels (W). This production identifier stuck as a nickname pronounced "duck."

using the currency anyway. The motorcycle journey to pick up the pay for himself and his company turned out to be the most exciting thing to occur in the staging area. The man driving the motorcycle from a neighboring explosive ordnance disposal unit had never actually driven one before and proceeded to speed through the narrow roads in England. It was a death defying experience.<sup>49</sup>

The last move to be made in England was from the staging area to the ships. On June 2<sup>nd</sup> the 618<sup>th</sup> was sent to Edgcumbe Park at Plymouth, England. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June until the 5<sup>th</sup>, Lt. Best and his men waited on the LST that would transport them across the English Channel.<sup>50</sup> Setting sail at last for the final trip across was welcome after days aboard the cramped landing ship. Arriving off the coast of Normandy early on June 6<sup>th</sup>, Best's unit was assigned to land on Omaha Beach with the second wave. The landings at Omaha Beach were not going well, however, and Lt. Best and his men were left holding on the ships. They were watching the dust and debris rising from the naval bombardment, not hearing the sounds until well after the shell had detonated. Shortly afterward, he would hear the gun that fired the shell.<sup>51</sup>

The men on Omaha Beach were definitely having a rough go of the attack. The 116<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team of the 29<sup>th</sup> "Blue and

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<sup>49</sup> Edwin Best, Oral history transcript, 3-5.

<sup>50</sup> LST stands for Landing Ship Tank.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

Gray" Division made the initial assault on the right flank of Omaha Beach. The predawn hours saw the small landing craft circling off the coast. When the sun came up the little boats began to move in on the beach. The men aboard could only see the bluffs above the beach and the spire of the church in Vierville. Enough smoke and dust were thrown into the air, due to the same bombardment that Lt. Best was observing, that vision was greatly inhibited.<sup>52</sup> "The Stonewall Brigade," the nickname of the 116<sup>th</sup>, arrived on the beach at 0630 to find a well-defended sector of beach garrisoned by the German 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>53</sup>

Some of the men never made it to the beach, with their landing craft sinking or exploding en-route. Many of the men who did make it found themselves up to their necks in water and under a hail of machine gun fire. Many were crowding behind the anti-ship obstacles, trying to get cover from the withering fire and rest up for the next rush. The wet clothing and equipment, along with the sand, weighed down the soldiers and sapped their strength. They only slowly advanced to the seawall that provided them cover, forced more by the incoming tide than by their officer' exhortations to seek shelter inland. Many men waited at the base of the seawall for engineers with explosives to clear a way through the barbed wire to the pillboxes on the beach. Only

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald Drez ed., *Voices of D-Day: The Story of the Allied Invasion Told by Those Who Were There*. (Baton Rouge Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 201.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Balkoski, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division" in *The D-Day Encyclopedia* ed. David Chandler and James Collins. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994), 572.

when the wire was blasted away did the infantry enter the enemy trenches connecting the pillboxes and slowly cleared the beach.<sup>54</sup>

Pandemonium reigned. Men from the 116<sup>th</sup> were mixed in with men from the First Division and engineer units that had landed in the wrong area. Many had lost their weapons in the water or discarded what they were issued for what could be found on the beach. The clearing of barbed wire, and subsequent silencing of the beach pillboxes, did not begin until 0800. All the while the rest of the regiment, along with the mixed elements of engineers and other units attached for the landings, was still coming ashore.<sup>55</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> assault wave saw some vehicles arrive at around the same time as the assaults on the beach pillboxes were beginning. The first vehicles brought ashore were bulldozers and jeeps with equipment for the engineers to help clear the beach. It took about an hour for the landing craft carrying the bulldozers to maneuver close enough to shore to offload. Even then they were still in fairly deep water, but shallow enough for the men to wade to shore and for the vehicles to operate. These larger landing craft drew heavy fire, as the Germans seemed especially to target bulldozers. In addition, they fired white phosphorous rounds in hopes of setting the dozers on fire. An hour later, between 0830 and 0900, more vehicles arrived, this time

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<sup>54</sup> Drez, *Voices of D-Day*, 208-209.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

including trucks and halftracks as well as more bulldozers. More men also slowly made it ashore. The last group of vehicles from the 116<sup>th</sup> proved some of the most important: M-15 and M-16 halftracks. These were designed as mobile anti-aircraft vehicles but they served a much different purpose on the morning of June 6<sup>th</sup>. Equipped with light rapid fire cannon and machine guns, they directed heavy fire on the large pillboxes and fortifications high up on the bluff overlooking, and pouring fire upon, the beachhead. After clearing the initial group of pillboxes the heavily armed halftracks began moving down the beach supporting the infantry and approaching the beach exit.<sup>56</sup> Though the fighting on the right flank of Beach was not over, by late morning it had stabilized somewhat. The 116<sup>th</sup> "Stonewall Brigade" had lived up to its nickname, standing and eventually advancing under withering fire.

The men of the 115<sup>th</sup> "1<sup>st</sup> Maryland" Regiment were supposed to land right behind the 116<sup>th</sup>. Since the obstacles that were in the area had not been cleared nor had many of the German guns been silenced, the decision was made to delay their landing. Just before noon the 115<sup>th</sup> was committed in the landing area of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division just to the left of the 116<sup>th</sup>. They joined in the push off the beach. All told the 29<sup>th</sup> Division suffered almost 1,000 casualties on June 6. The 116<sup>th</sup> bore the brunt of that,

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 224-228.

accounting for 850 by itself. The third regiment of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, the 175<sup>th</sup>, did not land until the next day, June 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>57</sup>

Lt. Best did not wait until the next day to set foot on the shore of France. All through the events of the morning and midday the men of his detachment watched the bombardment with deep interest and concern, even taking cover from enemy shellfire from time to time. Best had to persuade many of the thirty-five men with him that it was safer on deck or just below, but not under vehicles or machinery. Had they taken a hit, or the LST they were on shifted from maneuvering, the men could have easily been crushed. As they watched they were only able to guess as to the goings on at Omaha Beach. As casualties were evacuated to the ships anxiety rose. As Lt. Best put it "knowing that we were destined to go to the place where they had just been put out of action was of no great comfort."<sup>58</sup>

Eventually the time they had been training and waiting for had come. In the early afternoon the men of the 618<sup>th</sup> lowered themselves to the smaller landing craft for the ride to the beach, and here, at the very outset, Best's training failed him. The craft they had transferred onto in training swayed only a small bit, but in the turbulent sea of the English Channel things were significantly different. The timing was tricky but

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<sup>57</sup> Balkoski, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division," 572.

<sup>58</sup> Best, Oral history transcript, 7-8.

Lt Best eventually managed to jump from the cargo net so that he was not hurt, although his transfer was awkward at best.<sup>59</sup>

Lt. Best made the ride to the beach uneventfully. His unit was able to get much closer than the previous landings and waded ashore in waist deep water. Though it was later in the day, and the German fire had died down, confusion was still widespread. The damaged, burning, and abandoned equipment littering the beach added to the chaos. In addition, like many others that day, they landed at the wrong end of Omaha beach, Easy Green instead of Dog Green. Considering the other half of his team, Lt. Boynton's detachment, landed on Utah Beach, he was still quite close to target. The two halves of his team were not to see each other until the two beachheads had linked up sometime later.<sup>60</sup>

The initial job for the ammunition company was to set up a small supply dump on the beach. The only supplies coming in on D-Day were aboard the DUKW's that had been preloaded, so many of the men with Lt. Best set out to find what they could on the beach. Unfortunately, a large number of the DUKW's sank and never made it ashore. Still, this small depot served many of the 29<sup>th</sup> forces until the 8<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>61</sup> The engagements that were

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

supplied by this dump would have included the battle on June 7<sup>th</sup> by the 175<sup>th</sup> Regiment to hold the bridge over the Vire River.<sup>62</sup>

On June 8<sup>th</sup> the 618<sup>th</sup> moved to Vierville, its original objective on D-Day. There they set up one of the first ammunition dumps in France as supply began to come in over the beach. More sobering, this also became the gathering point for those who had been killed in action at Omaha Beach and just inland. It was not only American ammunition that came into the dump, however. Lacking anywhere else to put it, captured German supplies were stored at the new dump. There were some unusual rounds that passed through their hands. Wooden versions of the famed "potato masher" hand grenade and blank rifle rounds were common. Not surprisingly, this unusual "ammunition" led to some rampant speculation. Since one type of bullets was wooden tipped, some GI's thought that it was a new round that was designed to prevent ricochets in urban combat or inflict wounds that would be harder to treat. In actual fact, these rounds were actually just blanks.<sup>63</sup>

The uniform for Lt. Best was a bit different from that of the standard infantry lieutenant who landed on either of the American beachheads. On the beach he wore the gray-green overalls that had been treated by the Chemical Corps. Though they smelled awful and constantly looked dirty they would, in

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<sup>62</sup> Balkoski, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division," 572.

<sup>63</sup> Best, Oral history transcript, 10-11.

theory, protect against chemical agents. That could come in the form of an attack or, more likely, an accident at the ammo dump. The other unusual item was his helmet. It was painted with the blue and gold insignia of the Amphibian Command. Above that was a white arc identifying him as personnel assigned to the beach area, so those controlling traffic would not force him off of the beach.<sup>64</sup>

The depot at Vierville supplied some important actions. The 116<sup>th</sup> Regiment relieved the Rangers that had taken Point du Hoc and liberated the port of Grandcamp on June 8<sup>th</sup>. The 115<sup>th</sup> was pressing inland and on June 10<sup>th</sup> was ambushed by a German detachment at Le Carrefour.<sup>65</sup> The advance toward the next objective for the 19<sup>th</sup>, St. Lo, was slow but the Americans were advancing.

On June 11, 1944, the 618<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Ammunition Company made its move off of the beach. Their next location was near Formigny, a few miles inland.<sup>66</sup> It was there they set up a proper supply dump for the fighting that was to follow.

The advance on Saint Lo was to be slow and costly. Over the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of June the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division ran into a new unit. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Division of the German Army had moved into the line. Over those two days the division lost around 600

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<sup>64</sup> Best, Oral history transcript, 12.

<sup>65</sup> Balkoski, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division," 572.

<sup>66</sup> Best, Oral history transcript, 14-15.

men. After regrouping the 29<sup>th</sup> made another push toward St. Lo on the 16<sup>th</sup>. This attack progressed to three miles outside of the town. It was during this period that the 29<sup>th</sup> division, and the 116<sup>th</sup> in particular, showed great prowess on the field with the new tactics and equipment that had been experimented with for clearing lanes through the hedgerows.<sup>67</sup> On June 18<sup>th</sup> hill 108 was the scene of a major German counter attack. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 175<sup>th</sup> Regiment held what became known as "Purple Heart Hill" after major fighting and forty percent casualties. Over the twelve days it took to reach a point three miles outside of St. Lo, the 29<sup>th</sup> suffered 3,500 casualties.<sup>68</sup>

It took another month of fighting around the town before the American units were able to enter it. The 30<sup>th</sup> Division had moved in and was helping on the right flank of the 29<sup>th</sup> all through the end of June and July. On July 18<sup>th</sup> the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 115<sup>th</sup> Regiment was the first to enter St. Lo. It was down to 450 men, or about fifty percent strength. Its commander, Colonel Glover Johns, Jr., said, "The town was being held by the artillery, really, as the infantrymen were little more than guards for the observations posts." It was two days later that men of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division entered St. Lo and finished securing the town. Casualties for the 29<sup>th</sup> Division totaled 4,718 during the

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy; How GIs Fought the War in Europe 1944-1945* (Lawrence Kansas, The University of Kansas Press, 1994), Pg 52.

<sup>68</sup> Balkoski, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division," 572.

period from June 6<sup>th</sup> until July 20<sup>th</sup>. After this initial fighting, preparation for the next stage of the war in Europe, Operation Cobra, began.<sup>69</sup>

Lt. Best, just behind the lines of this battle, wrote descriptions of it to his wife, Lynn Ann. His first letter after D-Day was penned on June 11<sup>th</sup> when the 618<sup>th</sup> was moving to Formigny. He assured Lynn Ann that he was alive and well, his letters delayed only because he was busy. Writing from his pup tent-covered foxhole, he said that he missed her but he needed to be there. According to Lt. Best, "if anything spelled the Nazi doom, this current operation is it" and he was helping out.<sup>70</sup> The 618<sup>th</sup> supporting the slow moving line, did not move much itself. On the 15<sup>th</sup> he wrote of his home,

Greetings from the fox-holes of France. I am sitting in mine right now, but for reasons of comfort rather than protection.<sup>71</sup> You should see my foxhole, dug with my own hands. It is big enough for two, and I assure you that you would be a welcomed addition, although you might not enjoy sleeping beneath the ground level...My pup tent I have pitched over the fox

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe; The Triumph of American Infantry divisions, 1941-1945* (Lawrence Kansas, The University of Kansas Press, 1999) Pg 158

<sup>70</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 11 June, 1943. Private Collection.

<sup>71</sup> This is probably more an assurance to his wife than an accurate statement. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, five days later, he wrote of being woken up by an artillery barrage.

hole, and for a Southern Colonial touch I have added a front porch made of a bit of canvas.<sup>72</sup>

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, just entering the closing days of the campaign at St. Lo, Best's accommodations changed again. Lt. Best, who had found out just days prior that he had been made a First Lieutenant just as he had set out from England, and two other officers finished building a "small house." It was built out of scraps of wood and other debris found in the area.

It is twelve feet long and ten feet wide, high enough to stand up in. We have a double bunk and an Army cot, a folding table and two chairs. A plentiful supply of candles furnishes us light. Very comfortable and named "Sleepy Hollow."<sup>73</sup>

Though the occasional sniper took shots at them, the men of the 618<sup>th</sup> were relatively safe behind the lines in the communications zone. Artillery did, on occasion, strike close by, as well as the odd German air raid. The ammunition depot was guarded by anti aircraft emplacements near by to defend from the latter.<sup>74</sup> Lt. Best did not spend all of his time in the safety of

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<sup>72</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 15 June, 1944.

<sup>73</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 7 July, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 19 July, 1944.

his foxhole or makeshift house at the dump. Taking army business, and in a bit of sightseeing, Lt. Best was in a jeep and, upon reaching an unnamed coastal town, took an officer up on an offer to see the fortifications. They were just as the Germans had left them, even down to the food in storage.<sup>75</sup> It was after this point that the fighting moved perceptibly away from Lt. Best.

Toward the end of July and at the beginning of August Lt. Best began to tour the war-torn Norman countryside on what little spare time he had. He viewed the farms and hedgerows with favorable comparisons to the English countryside. With the terrain drying out he did find it a bit dusty compared with England. As the front progressed he noted pleasant conversations with the French locals and that the children were again playing and singing. He toured where he had been previously, trying to gain perspective he could not have had under the duress he had experienced the first time there. Lt. Best went back and found his first foxhole outside Vierville. It was easy to find though it had been filled in. On his travels behind the line he tried to purchase a gift or two for his wife. The Germans had cleaned Normandy out quite thoroughly, and the destruction of battle had not helped his quest. The majority of souvenirs were German signs, books, and ammunition. In particular he picked up a

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<sup>75</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 16 July, 1944.

German-French dictionary so he could brush up on both languages at one time and a German notebook that would later be used as stationary. All through this his unit was handling many of the munitions that were being used in the hedgerows and being stockpiled for the next offensive.<sup>76</sup>

It was during this time of heavy work, but relative safety, for Lt. Best that Operation Cobra was playing out. During the middle of July, 1944, the American Army in Normandy under General Omar Bradley had been moving the artillery around. The majority of American heavy artillery was shifted to support VII Corp. The first forty minutes of Operation Cobra accounted for 140,000 shells being fired by these heavy support units. That number does not count the divisional artillery that was involved. There was one problem with using that many artillery pieces. As fast as Lt. Best and those in the ammunition supply units were offloading, there was still not enough ammunition for all of the required artillery fire. So, in addition to the massive numbers of heavy guns, the US Army Air Corps was called into action. The medium and heavy bombers were used to carpet bomb the German positions in preparation for the infantry assault. One of the heavy B-17 bombers could carry the equivalent of 100 howitzers firing. It was felt by General Bradley and many on his staff that the bombers would finish the

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<sup>76</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, July-August, 1944.

job.<sup>77</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, 1944, General Bradley gave the order to begin Operation Cobra. The weather got steadily worse and it was called off. Some of the planes missed the recall order and went ahead with their bombing runs. Among other American installations, the bombers hit one ammunition depot. Lt. Best made no mention of an air-raid by either side around this period, so it would be safe to say it was a different facility. The next day, when the final attack order was given, the ground troops did not fare any better. The 4<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> Divisions, the spearhead of the attack, took heavy casualties from some of the American bombers dropping their bombs short of their objective.<sup>78</sup>

These divisions were facing the German 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, which the 29<sup>th</sup> had faced on D-day, and the heavily depleted Panzer Lehr Division.<sup>79</sup> With the American 30<sup>th</sup> Division leading the way, a slow day of progress ensued. It was slightly better than a normal day of hedgerow fighting and very intense. Though it seems that the progress was poor, and not all of the objectives accomplished, the 30<sup>th</sup> had taken the high ground.<sup>80</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> also saw similar advances on the first day. Though the advance was slow at first the German units were battered. The

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<sup>77</sup> James Carafano, *After D-Day; Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout*. (Boulder Colorado, Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2000), 101-102.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 111-114.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 129-130.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 143-144.

Panzer Lehr Division in particular had been shaken badly. Noticing that the standard German counter attack did not come after the 25<sup>th</sup>, General Collins knew that the command and control of the Germans had been broken. The next day armored divisions and more infantry divisions, including the 29<sup>th</sup>, were added to the battle. Operation Cobra was called to a halt on July 31<sup>st</sup> being considered a victory. On August 1<sup>st</sup> General George Patton and the Third U.S. Army were activated and began the push east with Allied forces entering Paris on August 25th.<sup>81</sup> All of this would not have been possible without the efforts of Lt. Best, his men, and others like them in the ordnance ammunition companies.

Though Lt. Best was a small, but very important, cog in the Army machine in Europe, he wondered what others thought of his service. His letters to Lynn Ann portrayed someone with no doubts about his own worth, but thinking that others, both in Europe and back home, would not understand his role in the war. He wrote that he did not mind not having a purple heart or any combat ribbon, he was proud enough of the European ribbon he earned and the Victory ribbon that was sure to follow. He was very glad not to have any purple hearts. He did wonder if he should hide his ribbons back stateside and tell people he had

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<sup>81</sup> Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, Pg 166-167.

never been to Europe at all and spent the war at home. This was not out of shame but the misunderstanding of his role.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to his primary duties with the company, to which he was referring, he had been an administrative and personnel officer. He had performed these duties since just after the 618<sup>th</sup> arrived in England. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August he asked to be, and was relieved of, many of his extra duties. The main duty he retained was that of Judge Advocate officer. He served as a lawyer in Europe, both for prosecution and defense, for much of the remainder of the war. It was this duty that, even while he was on loan to the supply corps from the amphibious command, he would remain proud of.

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<sup>82</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, end of July- beginning of August 1944.

## CHAPTER 4

### BEHIND THE LINES IN FRANCE

The front line pressed ever eastward. September was a calm month for Lt. Best and the men of the 618<sup>th</sup>. They remained in position near the beaches in Normandy, still providing supply to the main battlefronts. He was reading often of the American advance into the Low Countries. He did lament the fact that he was behind the lines, wondering what others would think, but understood that he played a vital role in what was going on.

Lt. Best spent part of his enforced leisure in finding some gifts to send back home; fossils and rocks were unearthed and cups were purchased and sent home, along with German memorabilia found around Normandy. This "souvenir hunting" would eventually include, on occasion, weaponry, up to the size of infantry anti-tank weapons. As he moved around the northern French countryside in his duties, there were many more opportunities to acquire odds and ends to send to his wife than before. He also sent much of his pay home, just as he had done in England and in the first months after the invasion of France. Lynn Ann also began sending some goods, primarily stationary and

candy, back to Lt. Best. These goods were a most welcome addition.<sup>83</sup>

With time to think and reflect, Best found that his wife and home were constantly on his mind. As with many soldiers, after such a long time away, serious homesickness had set in. A great portion of every letter was dedicated to writing about home, either missing it or inquiring about the goings on. The increased distance from the front and slightly more spare time, in addition to the length of time spent overseas, must have influenced this intensifying sense of loneliness.<sup>84</sup>

October saw a distinct shift in duties for Lt. Best. He had been, for some time already, a company judge advocate lawyer, but it was early in this month he began to write much more about these duties. It seems that part of the reason for this was a request by troops to be represented by him. But beyond the seemingly mundane description of his activities, Best revealed something very unusual. The vast majority of these requests for legal aid and representation were made by "negro" troops. As Lt Best stated,

Yesterday I had another court martial case. As I may have told you, I am now in demand among the colored folks around here as a defense counsel.

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<sup>83</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, September 1944.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*

Without bragging, honey, I tell you I work hard for those boys. I feel that they are entitled to a spirited defense, and that is what I give them. So far I have had excellent results. I who but a short time ago was on the side of the prosecution. There are no officers around here from the south but me, and my colleagues consider it strange that colored boys want a Southerner to defend them. But I suppose I understand these boys after a fashion.<sup>85</sup>

This seems to be a very unusual situation. The majority of all officers in African-American units were white, so the request by a black soldier to have a white officer defend him would not necessarily have been unusual. In addition, when many African-American units were formed, Southern officers were given priority in assignment to these units, since they were thought to have more familiarity with African-Americans, so such assignments would have been a good way to maintain control over these units.<sup>86</sup> Upon entering the army at the beginning of the war, many African Americans expected racial attitudes to be different. Instead, finding their situation of discrimination no better than that in civilian life in most areas of the northern

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<sup>85</sup> Edwin Best, Letter to Lynn Ann Best, 11 October 1944.

<sup>86</sup> Ulysses Lee. *The United States Army in World War Two: Special Studies, The Employment of Negro Troops*. Washington D.C.: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1966. As found on <http://www.army.mil/cmhp/books/wwii/11-4/index.htm>, 189 Last accessed on 6/22/06.

United States, morale among African-American troops became a problem. In a 1943 survey administered by the Army, over half of black soldiers surveyed said that they would ask the President, if given the chance, about matters of racial discrimination.<sup>87</sup>

Things did improve, if only slightly, once overseas. Many white officers and men who were working with African-Americans began, however grudgingly, to respect them. Moreover, many officers and NCOs requested that the African-Americans who had been assigned to their units remain in place when attempts were made, by higher echelon commanders, to transfer the soldiers to new units. This included both units on or near the front line as well as support units as far back as airfields.<sup>88</sup> Still, too much should not be made of this marginally improved racial atmosphere. The majority of white troops continued to view African-Americans as inferior, while large numbers of black troops could see little advantage to risking their lives in service to a segregated system that considered them second class. What is unusual, in this case, then, is not only the willingness of a white Southerner to work alongside African-American troops, but his eagerness to help. An estimated two-thirds of US Army officers from the Southern states were unwilling to even work alongside African-Americans.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 326.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 344-345.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*. 304.

Lt. Best found an added benefit in his increasing involvement in legal work, above the inherent satisfaction he found in such duty. It enabled him to travel and visit even more of France than just the Norman countryside he had been in for the previous few months. He spent many days on temporary duty working on these cases, spending the night in hotels in Paris. In the preparation of his defenses, or prosecutions as the case may be, he also traveled to smaller cities and towns, interviewing witnesses or others involved in the case. He never mentioned the particulars of either the cases or the smaller towns to which he traveled, writing in detail only about his private hotel in Paris. Still, for one who so enjoyed immersing himself in a new culture, these trips must have been very satisfying.<sup>90</sup>

These travels enabled him not only to see the sights but also experience the culinary delights of France more than his post with the 618<sup>th</sup> Company had allowed. He was able to eat more fresh vegetables and meat than before due to his duties taking him to more secluded, rural farming areas. These victuals were far superior to the hard cheese and crackers written of in the months following D-Day. Lt. Best was also able to sample some of the finer beverages of France on these trips. Wine, champagne, and cognac became popular after-hours drinks and he tried to

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<sup>90</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, October -November 1944.

save some on occasion for enjoyment later or possibly on his return home. Gaining some of these finer "spiritual" products was occasion for Lt. Best to make his father-in-law envious.<sup>91</sup>

All this changed toward the beginning of December. The 618<sup>th</sup> was transferred to the south of France sometime before the 10<sup>th</sup> of December.<sup>92</sup> At this time Best also stopped writing about his activities as a legal advocate for either the defense or government. He now resumed his duties with the ammunition depot, to the near complete exclusion of his other functions. The men of the 618<sup>th</sup> were still supplying the front lines with as much ammunition as they could, but as the front had now stabilized far to the east, they had also had to relocate to a new area.

This change of location meant long working hours for Lt. Best, not unlike what he saw in June and July of 1944. His travel was very limited. He did comment that he liked the countryside of the south of France much more so than Normandy. The weather along the Mediterranean was quite appealing, as even the rainstorms did not draw such negative comments as those of Normandy. Lt. Best also remarked acidly that he was getting sick of the Norman hedgerows by the time that he left.<sup>93</sup>

Though he was not eating as well as he was while traveling around the Norman countryside, the food with the 618<sup>th</sup> unit does

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 10 December 1944.

<sup>93</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, November-December 1944.

improve. In the South of France they had the good fortune of receiving the wares of authentic French chefs. Lt. Best became quite a fan of French soups, in particular. These were not frequent visits to local restaurants, but they were most definitely a welcome addition and greatly boosted morale.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the new culinary delights, Lt. Best gained more comforts with the move. He began to pick up some of his old reading habits from more peaceful days. Periodicals and books had become more readily available. Many were still in French but American items were on his reading list as well. Though he was unable to leave the depot as often, these items, in addition to the ever-welcome letters from home, helped pass the days to the end of the war.<sup>95</sup>

Any news from home was, of course, appreciated. Family news, and that of friends overseas, often drew comment. The health of family members was foremost for Lt. Best, but in addition he was concerned with the welfare of friends who were also overseas. The political developments going on back home were also important. He was glad to hear that President Roosevelt had been re-elected, remarking that he believed the American people had chosen wisely. As a counter to such good news, it was a very sad day when he heard of the President's death. News of the war, outside of those they knew involved, was

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<sup>94</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, November 1944-April 1945.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

of little note. Both Lt. Best and his wife Lynn Ann knew what was going on and time was better spent writing about other matters.<sup>96</sup>

The idea of the end of the war seemed ever present though. As with many GI's he wondered if, after the fighting in Europe, he would be sent to the Pacific. There had been no firm indication of this, but it was a serious concern. Lt. Best knew the war in Europe was drawing to a close and even the news of the Battle of the Bulge did not shake his conviction. If he did ever have any doubts about Allied Victory, Lt. Best did not share them.<sup>97</sup>

Doubts or not, the war steadily ground to an end, and like virtually all other GI's he was ecstatic when the war was finally over. The most important thing for him, as for most of the troops, was the now tangible taste of home. He knew that he would not be heading home immediately, however.<sup>98</sup>

Life on a post did not change much even though the fighting in Europe was over. The work for him remained the same, dealing with the sprawling ammunition dumps that had grown up in the south of France during the latter stages of the war in Europe. He was not stationed at just one dump but transferred about dealing with one after another. The ammunition company was still

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, May 9, 1945.

supplying ammunition to the men in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Though the fighting had officially ended, the troops kept training, including practice at rifle ranges. In the early months this was due to the notion that some units would be sent to the Pacific to help end the war against Japan. Lt. Best thought that this was a possibility even for the 618<sup>th</sup>, but it was a rather remote chance at best. Some of the ammunition, what did not go to training in Europe, was sent out on ships. Presumably this would have been to the Pacific, among other destinations. The sprawling dumps had to be dealt with one way or another. Life took on a relative ease that could be associated with the civilian world. The serious pressures of supplying frontline units fighting had been lifted. The hours became more regular, though the dreaded night shifts were still not a thing of the past.<sup>99</sup>

The regular hours gave him opportunity to relax in the off hours slightly more than in the previous months. With free time once more, he picked up on his reading again. *Time* and other periodicals began to arrive with some regularity, much to the joy of Lt. Best. Also, he began to read literature again, significantly expanding his reading list over this period. Movies, both on and off post, were particularly enjoyable. These included American pictures as well as some French cinema. Though

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<sup>99</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, May 1945 to February 1946.

the French films were not quite up to the same level of American films, in his opinion, they were far superior to that of the English pictures he had seen in the months leading up to D-Day. Lt. Best also began to experience the culture of French theater. He and a few fellow officers began to travel to see plays and opera at the various towns in the areas they were assigned. These were a welcome addition to the entertainment venue, especially when the movies grew stale.<sup>100</sup>

His venues were not limited to the post and its immediately adjacent towns, however. Lt. Best began to travel again. He took time out first to see the sights of southern France. Though he had seen them during his duties, he got a much better tour of the churches and historic attractions of the area. From the South of France he expanded a bit, traveling to Rome, northern Italy, and the French Alps. As with England, he was impressed by the history the area had to offer, with churches and cathedrals drawing particular note. After touring the areas that were fairly easy to get to, Lt. Best began to branch out. He returned to Normandy, commenting on the significant devastation that was still there as a result of the campaigns of many months ago. Eventually he took a trip back to England. Here he visited many

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

of the places he had been during the preparation for the invasion.<sup>101</sup>

Lt. Best used these travels to stock up on new items. Mostly, these were mementos to send home. Sticking to his tradition of acquiring books, he did visit bookshops in England and France in order to stockpile reading material. Coupled with his obtaining spoils from the Germans on his journeys, he had sent home quite a plethora of items during the war.

Judging from his letter, his encounters with the French, Italians, and English were remarkably pleasant. He seemed to have no real problem with the French or English with whom he dealt. The one exception was traveling across England after missing a connecting train, as it put him out late at night in a small town with little chance of getting a room. His descriptions of events lack the tension that could be felt in the occupied territories between military personnel and civilians. This alone put him at odds with many of his fellow GI's, who often seemed to revel in complaining about the foreign nationals they encountered, especially in France.<sup>102</sup>

There was tension within the Army itself though. The civilian soldiers of the army, now that the job had been done, wanted to go home. Ill will was growing between the career officers and those who wanted to get out of the army as soon as

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, May 1945-February 1946.

possible and resume their civilian careers. Rumors spread that they were being kept in so that those career men who had gotten promoted would have something and someone to command. Best reported this particular rumor in a joking tone, but the fact that views along these lines were expressed at all shows a certain level of friction.<sup>103</sup>

Some of this frustration came from the points system. A soldier would earn points depending on time in service, medals awarded, and campaigns involved in. Once eighty-five points were earned, orders were cut to go back to the states.<sup>104</sup> Lt. Best felt he was getting a raw deal out of this. Even though his job was crucial in fighting the war, because he served behind the lines he received only two battle stars on his European Theater of Operations medal. He, along with everyone else in his unit, would have to wait before going home.<sup>105</sup>

He got one step closer in November 1945. Early in the month he was transferred to the 185<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Battalion. His job remained the same, just with a different unit.<sup>106</sup> He spent the winter with the 185<sup>th</sup> and also saw the coming of spring. His letters at the end of February 1946 show that he knew the homecoming was close. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1946, Lt. Edwin Best sent his

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<sup>103</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, July 1945-February 1946.

<sup>104</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992), 281.

<sup>105</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, July 1945-November 1945.

<sup>106</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 12 November 1945.

last letter home from Europe.<sup>107</sup> He had spent one year and eight months in France, and a total of two years and two months overseas. For Lt. Edwin Best the war was finally over.

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<sup>107</sup> Edwin Best, Letters to Lynn Ann Best, 2 March 1946.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Lt. Best would continue his service to the United States Army through the Korean War. He was assigned to the Army General Staff at the Pentagon, eventually leaving the army as a Lieutenant Colonel in the mid 1960s. Although his tenure with the army was over, he continued to serve his east Tennessee home. He was the Director of Maryville College for thirty years, including service as Chairman of the Board toward the end of his tenure. At the same time, he was on the Board of Directors for the Blount Memorial Hospital, serving as its president for a decade of that time. He also spent fifty-five years as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church, of which he had been a member since birth. Edwin Best died on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1993, after finally finishing his book, *A Place Called Greenback*, which he had been threatening to write since his retirement from TVA in 1975.<sup>108</sup>

His story, as detailed by his letters home from 1943 until 1946, serves to remind us of two major things. The first is that members of the support corps were just as important as their more chronicled brethren in the line units and command units. They often operated in harsh conditions, due both to climate and enemy fire. Their job was indispensable to the war effort, the

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<sup>108</sup> Edwin Best. *A Place Called Greenback: An East Tennessee Town at the Turn of the Century, 1870-1917*. (Maryville, Tennessee, Byron's Graphic Arts, 1993), 4-6.

line units being unable to fight for very long without the services they provided.

The second major point his letters bring to the fore is the fact that there are letters at all. With the passing of many of the World War Two generation, these letters are, in some cases, all the record that is left. Some have not been kept by family, have been lost due to natural disasters, or have disappeared for a variety of other reason. These letters only survived and were made available for research because of some very attentive family members, otherwise they could have been lost. The same problem can be found with journals or other written records that are kept in private hands and are more susceptible to being lost than official records.

There are also implications for future work along these lines as well. With the advent of electronic communications, and the lack of record keeping of them by many, stories like these may never be kept at all. Fortunately, the letters of Lt. Edwin Best were kept, adding another perspective to a very large conflict.

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