

## **Daughter of D-Day veteran and SD Mines Graduate, class of 1938, remembers her father for the 75th anniversary**

My father, Donald Kenneth Johnson, graduated from the South Dakota School of Mines class of 1938, so proud of his degree in Civil Engineering. Dad grew up on a farm in Beresford South Dakota, the middle of five sons, and worked and saved for a year before heading to Rapid City, then took on a night job to pay his fees.

When the war broke out, Dad joined the Seabees, the Naval Construction Battalion, working his way up from a lieutenant jg to a 1st lieutenant by the end of the war. He landed in the D-Day invasion, served 5 months in Normandy, then served in the Pacific till the end of the war in 1945.

The Seabees' mottos are 'We Build, We Fight' and 'Can Do!'; their mascot, a bee, carries a drill and a gun.

While stationed in England before the invasion of France, Dad was one of the officers in charge of building the Rhino ferries, called 'the Secret weapon of the invasion'.

The Rhino Ferries, powered by two 143-horse power Chrysler outboard marine motors, measured one hundred seventy-five feet long and could hold forty vehicles and up to six hundred tons, their strength equal to a civilian highway bridge. During the invasion, soldiers, trucks and tanks would be able to unload from the ships onto the ferries and cram into every available inch for the trip to the landing beaches.

An official Navy report after the invasion described the contribution of the Seabees:

"During the critical ten-day period following D-Day, the Seabees unloaded 16,000 vehicles, 25,000 tons of ammunition and supplies, and 32,000 troops, a total of approximately 138,000 tons, all urgently needed on the expanding beachhead."

The open decks of the Rhinos were constantly exposed to enemy shell fire and flak splinters. The danger to the crews was great at all times.”

My mother told me that when my father returned from the war, he had nightmares for years. He'd wake up in a cold sweat, crying out and flailing his arms, his eyes blank with terror and pain. Many of those nights, he wouldn't sleep again for hours, but would wander through the house, checking on my two older brothers, watching them breathe safely in their beds.

As he listened to the quiet, he could also hear the sounds of war in his head, the explosion of bombs, the sound of planes overhead, the cries of wounded and dying men, all against the backdrop of the roar of the sea.

I was lucky. I was born years later and my father had found a way to deal with those demons and to go on to live a productive and happy life.

I was also lucky in another way. The stories my father told around the yellow Formica dinner table were about his happy memories of his time in France.

He'd describe how his high school French made 's'il vous plaît' come out sounding like 'silver plate'. (His French teacher in Beresford had never even *heard* French and just studied a lesson ahead.) But Dad would smile when he told how patient the French were with his efforts.

As a lieutenant in charge of the mess hall in the camp for two months, he'd load up pans of fresh food that would have gone to waste and take them to a different farm house each evening. "Oh, they would be so grateful," he'd say, and his eyes would shine remembering the happiness of the farmers at this simple gesture of goodwill.

Dad also became close to an orphan boy Gilbert, who lived near the camp, making sure that Gilbert came through the lunch line with Dad every day. Dad even tried unsuccessfully to adopt Gilbert and bring him home. In my childhood, I

felt curious about this French boy who could have been my older brother. He hovered in my consciousness, slightly out of focus.

I studied French in high school and college and worked hard to keep it up in my adult life. It was as if I had a connection to France through my father, and, though I couldn't explain it, it felt deep and true.

Near the end of my father's life, his body weak with cancer, I noticed how when he spoke about his time in France during the war, his eyes shone, he sat up straighter and his voice came out clear and strong. It was as if he regained some of the youthful vigor of his part in turning the tide of World War II.

He mentioned Gilbert again then, his voice becoming quiet, wistful. "I wonder what ever happened to him?" My father died in 1991.

For the 50th anniversary, June 6, 1994, I traveled to Normandy where I accepted a medal in my father's honor in a moving ceremony for veterans and their families. I spent a day touring the invasion beaches and learned that Dad had been a part of the largest land and sea invasion in the history of the world.

I had adored my father and thought I knew him well. But there was so much that he'd seen and experienced that he hadn't talked about. Why hadn't I encouraged him to come back to France again? Why hadn't I asked more questions and paid more attention, before it was too late?

I put an ad in the local paper to try to locate Gilbert, my father's orphan. I wasn't even sure how to spell his last name; I only knew how it sounded. I thought it would be impossible, after 50 years, but by a combination of luck and providence, I found him on what would have been my father's 80th birthday.

Gilbert had told his wife, his daughter and his grand-sons about the kind lieutenant who had wanted to take him home to America and that someday, someone would come. In our emotional reunion, when I told him that my father had never forgotten him, Gilbert wept.

My father's stories led me to France and to Gilbert. They also created a deep connection to the D-Day anniversaries that didn't end with the 50th. I stayed close to Gilbert and his family, and attended the both the 60th and the 70th anniversaries of D-Day, working as a translator and guide for returning veterans. The French locals would swarm around them and we'd all be wiping away tears as I translated their words of gratitude.

Now I will be in France again for the 75th ceremonies in France, the last time that veterans from D-Day will be alive for the events. I'll be staying with Gilbert's widow, who has become like a sister to me.

My heart is pulling me back, for my father, for Gilbert and for all the men of 'The Greatest Generation' who risked their lives in France, fighting to preserve our freedom.

And standing there with us, unseen, will be all the men who never came home. The words from the cemetery chapel above Omaha beach in Normandy express it well: "Think not only of their passing. Remember the glory of their spirit." We will remember them that day and, I hope, from now on.

Diane Covington 2019

After serving in World War II, Johnson served in the Korean War from 1951-1953, then worked as an engineer for the Navy till he retired in 1975. At that time he held the position of Director of Design in Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Diane Covington-Carter's award-winning memoir, *Finding Gilbert, A Promise Fulfilled* tells the story of finding her father's French orphan.

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