

# Training! Training! Training!

Suzie Harrison of the American Battle Monuments Commission Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial takes a closer look at US troops' preparations in the weeks before D-Day

By 1944 the Americans were ubiquitous – they were everywhere – with their candy and gum; smart uniforms and film-star good looks; jazz and jitterbugging ...and oh! those nylons, at \$20.00 a pair! The sociable GIs were beloved by adults and children alike.

The close alliance between the United States and Great Britain, burgeoned into 'the special relationship', (Sir Winston Churchill). Nearly 3.5 million Americans passed through Britain between 1942 and 1945, but, what was this 'friendly invasion' building-up to? It was the Normandy landings and the march to Berlin.

The Americans arriving from 1942 were raw recruits. What they needed was training, training, training ... exactly what they got. As D-Day approached, this became more realistic, with full, live-fire dress rehearsals.

Taking part in the final dry-run, Exercise Tiger on April 28, 1944, was Californian Sgt. Louis Bolton of the 607 Graves Registration Company. (Read more of his story, page 35). He found himself on a Landing Ship Tank sailing up the English Channel for a rendezvous, from where the troops would assault the beach at Slapton Sands, Devon.

Training was realistic and there were often casualties, but none so great as on this day. His small convoy was spotted by an enemy E-boat patrol, whose torpedoes created mayhem among the unsuspecting vessels.

748 young Americans lost their lives. 88 remain buried in British soil here at Cambridge American Cem-



etry; many, many more are commemorated on our Wall of the Missing. Louis was expecting to follow the fighting; to meticulously record the names of those who had fought and died. He was not expecting to perish in the cold waters of the English Channel, before the invasion even started.

As D-Day approached, units were concentrated in the Channel ports of southern England. During May 1944 every creek and estuary was crammed with landing craft – 'you could walk across every inlet, without getting your feet wet'. Among those waiting to sail to northern France was a three-man team from the 531st Engineer Shore Regiment.

Some soldiers were veterans of the three previous invasions. Plucked from Italy and brought to Britain, they were embedded alongside the raw recruits to pass on their expertise. One such team consisted of experienced soldier Otis Ham, 36, a professional baseball player; with Jay Rencher (Snowflake, Arizona) and Dan Shellenberg (Youngstown, Ohio), then aged 19. Their Commanding Officer told the engineers, "You are going to be cannon fodder ... three out of every four men will be dead within the first hour ... each man will train with two partners, so there will be one man [left] to get the job done..."

... and train they did. My father (a Junior Doctor) noted in his diary seeing American soldiers practicing mine clearance on the beach at Ilfracombe, Devon. I like to think that among those men were Otis, Jay and Dan. ★



From top:  
*Into The Jaws Of Death*, by Robert F Sargent;  
1Lt Sidney W Dunagan (left) was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and remains at Cambridge American Cemetery; The cemetery, at Maddingley, Cambridge.

