

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
John Ellery
World War II
1984

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Ellery, John. (1920-2001). Oral History Interview, 1984.

User: 1 audio cassette (ca. 15 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master: 1 audio cassette (ca. 15 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono

Abstract:

John B. Ellery, a Brooklyn (New York) native discusses his experiences during World War II with the 16th Infantry First Division (“Big Red One”) US Army as it was engaged in the June 1944 Normandy invasion (D-Day) to liberate Europe. He was part of the first wave of soldiers ashore on Omaha Beach. Ellery reflects upon the “unique” nature of Normandy despite his status at that point as a battle-hardened soldier. He recounts the obstacles confronted, and marvels at the tenacity and courage of the assaulting GI. His assigned sector of the beach, Easy Red, “turned out to be the hardest part of the whole invasion as far as the beach assault was concerned.” He muses on the timing of invasions and comments on the efficacy of supporting firepower, as well as of the extra equipment that he carried. Ellery accounts his D-Day experience as the highlight of his life, and feels that maintaining military strength best honors the achievement of his fellow GIs that day.

Biographical Sketch:

Ellery (1920-2001) served as a staff sergeant with the 16th Infantry First Division (“Big Red One”) US Army during World War II. He was present at the D-Day invasion of Normandy Beach on June 6, 1944, as well as participating in invasions in Africa and Italy. Postwar he became a communications professor and university administrator. His last residence was Stoughton, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Clifford Borden, 1984

Transcribed by Linda Weynand, 2012

Reviewed by Channing Welch, 2013

Abstracted by Jeff Javid, 2015

Interview Transcript:

Borden: [Approx. 2 min. pause before recording begins.] What are your recollections, Jack? [Mr. Ellery's nickname]

Ellery: We came back to England after the end of the fighting in Sicily and spent from November of '43 until June of '44 being re-equipped, picking up our replacements, and retraining so that by the time D-Day had arrived most of us—most of us old-timers—felt pretty confident that the newer people were ready to fit in with the old guard and get the job done. You gotta understand I was regular Army, and I had been in a very real sense preparing for this for about four years. I had already been through two invasions and the fighting in North Africa. I had been wounded twice. I didn't think that combat held any great surprises for me. In spite of that, Normandy turned out to be very special and unique. I think the breadth of the battlefield—that is, our sector, Easy Red Sector of Omaha Beach, was just about 1800 meters wide. It was very large. The intensity of the defensive fire, the opposition that we ran into, was much worse than we had expected, accentuated by the fact that there was an additional division that had been moving into our area for training maneuvers, and we were not expecting them. It was the 352nd Mobile Infantry Division of the German Army. So for an assault team to expect a reasonable amount of defense and encounter an overwhelming amount of opposition was pretty hard to handle. Plus the fact that the weather had been bad; the invasion was delayed for twenty-four hours. As I understand it, it was our last opportunity to go in before an extended period of bad weather. The sea was rough, and when you got to the beach you still had, oh, between 300 and 400 meters of ground to cover. Part of it was sand; part of it was shale bank. Where I landed there was quite a bit of salt marsh, and when you got through all of that you were then at the bottom of a bluff that was, I'd estimate, fifty feet high. And you were under fire from, oh, the time you were within a mile at least of the point at which you were going to drop the ramp on your LCVP [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel]. So that getting across that beach and then getting up into the heights was a devastating experience. To this day I don't understand really where the men got the courage to do that. It could have been a very demoralizing experience, and yet I saw men charging up over the shale bank, up the slope, through a minefield, and they got to the heights. I suppose we'll never know the total number of casualties, certainly in our assault section. My assault section lost eight men killed and seventeen wounded out of thirty-two men by the time we had cleared the high ground and joined up with some other, oh, segments of units that had been landed off their designated area. And this was very common: many, many units—for example, I think, part of the 116th which was to land on our right flank

landed on our extreme left flank; a couple of assault sections went in there. So it was very disorganized, and yet the ability of the officers of high rank—colonels, generals—to get their troops reorganized and moving out, and the ability of the men to operate under conditions like that—I tell you by the time the beach area was cleared by the assault sections I was convinced there was nothing in this world that could have stopped those men. They were unbeatable.

Borden: Where you were at the end of “The Longest Day”?

Ellery: Well, I was up on the high ground, probably 500 meters inland from the crest, possibly a little bit more than that. Certainly we hadn’t advanced much over a mile all told from the time we had landed. So if you figure, oh, maybe a total of 600 or 800 meters getting inland and maybe another 600 or 800—perhaps close to a mile inland.

Borden: You weren’t in the first wave?

Ellery: Yeah.

Borden: You were?

Ellery: Yes.

Borden: What was your unit and what type of casualties did you take by the end of the first day?

Ellery: On Omaha Beach there were two regiments that landed abreast: the 16th out of the 1st Division and the 116th out of the 29th Division. I was in the 16th Infantry, and our sector was Easy Red. I believe the 116th had Dog Green; I believe that was their sector. But Easy Red turned out to be the hardest part of the whole invasion as far as the beach assault was concerned. It was ironic that it was called “easy”. I think part of the difficulty was that it was, as I suggested a moment ago, so much broader than the other sectors: 1800 meters is a lot of ground to cover. So we came in with two battalions, and we had a floating reserve, and that’s what we took the high ground with: the men that survived that initial assault. There was another complicating factor in that they were trying out the submersible tanks. These were to be dropped off and come in underwater. We expected something like thirty-two tanks to support us in our sector; two of them came out of the water. I remember very clearly looking over my shoulder and thinking, “Well, here they come; we got all these tanks.” One came out, just got to the edge of the sand beach at the water line and took a direct hit. A few minutes later, a few seconds I suppose, the second one came out. It came up on the beach, turned left, and went about, oh, not

as much as fifty yards and took a broadside. Those are the only two tanks that got out, and they didn't have time to fire a shot.

Borden: The rest of them sank?

Ellery: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I don't know— One of the questions that I've wondered about ever since the invasion— it was the first time that we'd made an invasion in daylight. Sicily had been done under cover of darkness, and the landing in Africa was done in the dark. I don't know whether it's better or worse. In a dark, in a nighttime landing you wonder about where the rest of your people are, and what's happening, and you can't see very well, and you may overestimate the opposition because of traces and gun flashes. On the other hand, you're not as acutely aware of the number of casualties. In the daylight you can see what's going on, you have better visibility—although incidentally visibility was not great on Omaha, it was misty, and there was a lot of debris, dust, smoke; you couldn't see well at all, but you had the advantage of seeing what was happening. You also had the disadvantage of being immediately aware of how many men you were losing.

Borden: The Germans were known to have hardened their fortifications—pillboxes and so forth. How much good do think that our naval gunfire did as far as softening the German fortifications, defenses?

Ellery: I don't think it had—from when we got up to the top of the bluff on Easy Red—till we had a chance to look around and see how much damage had been done, it didn't seem to us that the artillery, the naval artillery or the Air Force bombing for that matter, had done a great deal of material damage. We didn't see the—there happened to be four emplacements in our area, and I came right up in front of one of them. There didn't seem to be much damage to them, but I think the pounding had a tremendous effect on the troops that were occupying it. I think that's what shook them up. It certainly kept their heads down to a substantial degree, and I think that close naval support that we got, naval fire, as we started up the slopes was undoubtedly helpful, but that had to be stopped. They were too afraid of short rounds. We couldn't walk into our own barrage. But I remember going into one of those concrete emplacements, and it didn't seem to have had a great deal of damage at all. But I can imagine that the men who were in there took a real beating because the concussion alone must have driven them silly.

Borden: So they had to be taken by hand, by infantry?

Ellery: Well, they started to run when we began to get into position to inflict some casualties. We, the assault section, were supposed to have a lot of equipment that we never got a chance to use. For example we carried a

flamethrower. I didn't see a single flamethrower used; they apparently all shorted out in the saltwater. I know ours wouldn't operate. As a matter of fact, we never even had much of a chance because I asked our flamethrower operators to try a blast once we got into the shell to see what—and it wouldn't operate and just a few minutes later he was killed anyway. We also had satchel charges and pull charges, but we lost all of those. The only thing that we had going was a Bangalore torpedo [an explosive charge within one or more connected tubes], and we used that to blow the wire—there was some wire right to our front. We blew that, and I don't know how much good that did because when we got through the wire we were in a minefield.

Borden: What about the beach obstacles that we see so often in pictures—the obstacles on the beach and also mines?

Ellery: I didn't see them do a great deal of damage to the assault section. Of course, we came in in LCVPs which are very small craft. They only hold thirty-two men. So I didn't see any LCVP that was blown up by one of the mined obstacles. It's possible: perhaps some of the vessels that I saw go up and I felt were hit by artillery might have set off a mine. I just don't know. But what the obstacles did do as far as the assault waves were concerned was keep you out. You had a harder time getting in which means—well, when I came off the ramp I was in water chest-high, and trying to move through that water with so much equipment was very slow and plodding and exhausting, and you were a target all this time. So that you had the additional problem of getting through water that was fairly deep, and then when you got out of the water you had another, oh, perhaps 300 to 400 meters to go over an area where you were still vulnerable to enfilade fire [gunfire directed along the length rather than the breadth of a formation].

Borden: So there was absolutely no cover?

Ellery: No cover. [laughs] I remember I got behind one of the obstacles and then just discovered that they had this pad—looked very much like a satchel charge, obviously explosive—attached to it. I thought, “This is a strange place to look for cover. I better take my chances and get moving.”

Borden: Do you have one particular experience during “The Longest Day” that you'd like to recount? A personal experience.

Ellery: The greatest single emotion that I can recall of the entire day was after we got to the high ground I felt ten feet tall. I was so proud of myself and of the men who had come up with me. I was so proud of my assault section that we had taken some very hard knocks, and yet when we got up there everybody was ready go—those that were left. I felt that nobody, there

weren't any soldiers who had ever fought better. And I still think that to this day, with Normandy as a ten, I don't think I've had the exhilaration, the thrill of an achievement, on that scale that ever came higher than a two in the past forty years.

Borden: Well, forty years later what are your thoughts as you view World War II in general and Europe? What are your thoughts forty years later with regard to what we did on that day and what's happened as a result?

Ellery: I think without a doubt D-Day changed history. I don't see it as a tragedy; war means fighting, and fighting means killing. It was something that had to be done. I think the real tragedy will come if we fail to recognize that the best security that we can provide our country is military strength. I do not think, in these times, we can honestly believe that the notion that the meek shall inherit the earth is a very viable philosophy in the present circumstances. If we fail to make the sacrifice that is necessary to protect what was accomplished by those thousands of men who died in the Normandy invasion, that's where the tragedy will exist.

[End of Interview]