

## THE HAND OF THE LORD

John T. Irvan

John Irvan was drafted 21 September 1943, although he already was twenty-six and had been married for three years. He had taught school, but was working as an inspector in an ammunition factory when he was drafted into the infantry. He was sent to Camp Wheeler, near Macon, Georgia, for basic training, after which he immediately was sent to England as a replacement soldier. He was assigned to the First Division—the Big Red One—which was preparing for the assault on Europe. This Division already had seen action in North Africa and Sicily, and Irvan found he was one of very few in his outfit without combat experience.

He joined the 16th Regiment in March 1944, and it was already in training for the invasion. The unit was stationed near Weymouth, England, which was one of the three principal ports from which the 1st Division embarked for Normandy. The next several weeks were spent in rigorous training and preparation for D-Day.

The 16th Regiment boarded the USS *Samuel Chase*, a Coast Guard ship which served as regimental headquarters for the invasion, some three or four days before the actual landing. During this short pre-invasion interval, the troops studied the huge, three-dimensional map—actually a type of diorama—of their landing area. Located in the hold of the ship, it was complete, to scale, down to minute details such as hedgerows, small buildings, and even boulders or rocks of any significant size.

On the morning of June 6, pre-invasion breakfast was served beginning at 3:00 a.m., with the mess boys in immaculate white jackets. Most of the meal of hot cakes, sausage, eggs, and coffee was left on the several plates, although it was the last hot meal they were to have for many days.

The 1st Division landed at Omaha Beach; other American troops were at Utah, while the British and Canadians went ashore at Gold, Juno, and Sword landings. Omaha turned out to be the deadliest of the landings, for a crack German Panzer unit—a full infantry division—happened to be on maneuvers on the cliffs above the beach.

The battle plan called for the 16th Regiment to be about three miles inland by night, but John Irvan and his comrades were barely at the top of the cliff, having lost approximately one-third of their strength in casualties. Irvan was able to get some sleep that night, atop the cliff, wrapped in his rain gear. Other landings met less enemy resistance, and by night, there were over 150,000 Allied troops ashore, and some eighty square miles of France had been taken.

Irvan was awarded the Silver Star for his activities on D-Day, which included carrying numerous wounded men through the surf out to landing craft for their treatment and transfer to hospitals. He disclaims any heroism, as do all his comrades-in-arms, with a single voice saying, "I was only doing my job."

He continued with the First through France, Belgium, and into Germany, where it captured Aachen and defeated the enemy in the Hürtgen Forest. After that encounter, the Division was relieved back to Belgium, the first time out of combat

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The editors were provided memorabilia (correspondence, clippings, pictures, scrapbooks, etc.) on loan; this article is drawn from that information and from conversations with the author.

in about six months. However, the very next day, the German counteroffensive known as the Battle of the Bulge began. So, after only one day of respite, the First was sent back into battle. The Division went on through Europe in other engagements, including the Ruhr, the Remagen crossing of the Rhine, and ending in Czechoslovakia.

Irvan personally raised the US flag over Bamberg, Germany, when the Big Red One captured it, a feat he remembers with pride. He received the Purple Heart (Battle of the Bulge), Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf clusters, ETO ribbon with five campaign stars, the D-Day Arrowhead, the Combat Infantryman's Badge, and the French Croix de Guerre, as well as the Silver Star. He was discharged in October 1945 at Camp Atterbury, Indiana.

From D-Day, 6 June 1944, until German surrender, 7 May 1945, Irvan was not in combat only one day. As to his D-Day experience, Irvan says, "The hand of the Lord had to have been on my shoulder all the way. I can't explain any other way I came through without a scratch."

