Vestal Man Recalls D-D

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Thursday will be the 30th anniversary of the invasion of France by the Allied Forces of World War II.

On the morning of June 6, 1944, about 1,000 planes and gliders dropped paratroops in the Normandy area. Some 2,400 British and U.S. bombers attacked the German installations.

More than 2.8 million men were in the Allied force: 20 U.S. divisions, 14 British, three Canadian, one French and one Polish.

The Germans had more than 60 divisions and reserves. There is no way of knowing how many area men took part in the invasion. There's no question that many did — many living through it, many not. What follows is the experience of one man.

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The Allied invasion of France during World War II was the largest and one of the most significant military exploits in history. One of the participants and witnesses

By STEVE HAMBALEK

was Henry O. Rathje of Ves-

On D-Day, June 4, 1944, Rathje was a seaman first class aboard the Coast Guard Landing Ship, Tanks (LST) 262, which was a part of the invading force, first at Utah Beach, then at Omaha Beach, where U.S. troops landed.

Rathje, 48, of 504 Mirador Drive, now an installer of telephone dial equipment for Western Electric, said he has vivid memories of D-Day.

"The first 24 hours were the most hectic. Nothing worked. We were supposed to be in the third wave, but the first and second waves had failed.

"The casualties were tremendous. We were unable to beach the ship. The number of people I saw drown you wouldn't believe. One LST hit a mine and sank immediately." There were no survivors, he said.

One of his memories of Utah Beach is seeing seemingly boundless fields of poppies behind the German pillboxes.

The LSTs were only 310 feet long. They carried armament and other equipment from England to France. On the return trip, they brought back the wounded, and later German prisoners of war.

Rathje said the top men in charge on D-Day had to improvise constantly because everything didn't go as planned and several unexpected problems arose.



Press Photo by Paul F. Konecny

SHIRT OFF HIS BACK — Henry O. Rathje, a veteran of the Allied invasion of France June 4, 1944, shows the shirt he wore during his service in the U.S. Coast Guard at the time.

At one of the beaches, the landing craft carrying troops and equipment hit a sand bar instead of the mainland and many of the soldiers, loaded down with equipment, jumped into the water and drowned.

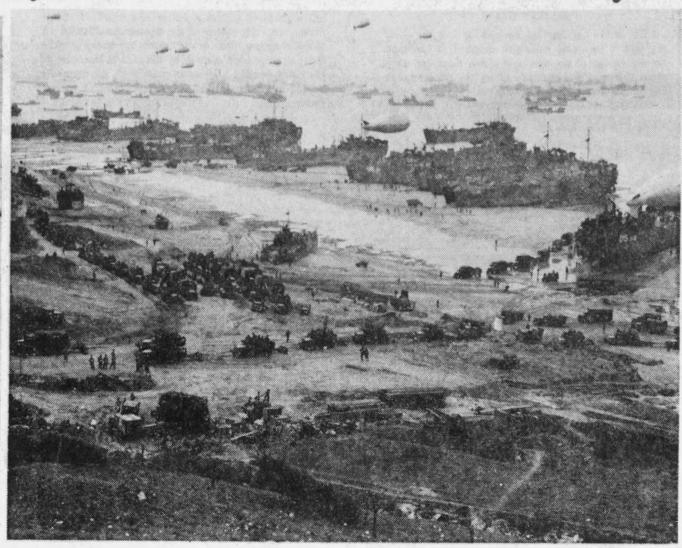
-Someone had to make the decision to sink 15 Liberty ships to form a breakwater for the landing craft, he said.

About 3,000 U.S. combat men died in the first few hours of the fighting at Omaha Beach alone.

Rathje said his LST made 66 crossings from England to France between D-Day and Victory-in-Europe (VE) Day, May 8, 1945. Each crossing took about 12 hours, he said.

One of Rathje's duties was

ay, His Role at Normandy



-Official U.S. Coast Guard Phoro

SOON AFTER D-DAY — On June 8, 1944, this was the scene at Utah Beach in France, where U.S. troops invaded France two days before during World War II. Balloons were used to ward off low flying enemy strafers. Rathje's ship is second one from right.

helmsman. On one crossing, when he was steering the LST, the bow hit a mine, he said. Luckily, the bow was swinging away, and there was only a swoosh of water.

One of the ironies of Rathje's life is that he could have possibly served in the German armed forces instead of the U.S. Coast Guard. His parents were natives of Die Insel Forh, North Friesland, now in West Germany.

They emigrated to the U.S., and opened a delicatessen in Brooklyn, where Henry and two other children were born. When the business collapsed during the depression of the 1930s, the mother took the children back to her home in

Die Insel Fohr, the father remaining in Brooklyn.

Henry attended school, speaking not German but Friesich. One day the children were informed that henceforth they would be taught and would speak only High German. The order had come from Adolph Hitler.

Rathje said one of his

grandfathers looked at him and issued the order, "Get that kid back to the U.S." and he returned, at the age of 11. In 1943, when he was 17, he enlisted in the Coast Guard.

About a year later he found himself aboard the 262, bobbing in the flotilla that had a date with history on the coast of France.

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Schecter In Race, Raps Local GOP 'Watergate Mentality'



TEN DAYS TO REMEMBER

SUN.	MON.	TUES.	JUNE WED.	THURS.	FRI.	SAT.
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13		11	12	13	14	15
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