

# 'Make room for the rest of us'

Sheboygan man among the first to storm Omaha Beach on D-Day

BY BOB PETRIE

Sheboygan Press staff

It was a message that even 65 years later, in the comfort of the dining room of his Sheboygan home, Leonard Ploeckelman finds stirring, yet simple.

In the early morning of June 6, 1944, Ploeckelman, then a 23-year-old staff sergeant with the U.S. Army's 5th Ranger Battalion, was with about 60 fellow soldiers, just hours before taking part in perhaps the most famous invasion in U.S. military history - D-Day - and about to hear directly from Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the Allied Forces in Europe.

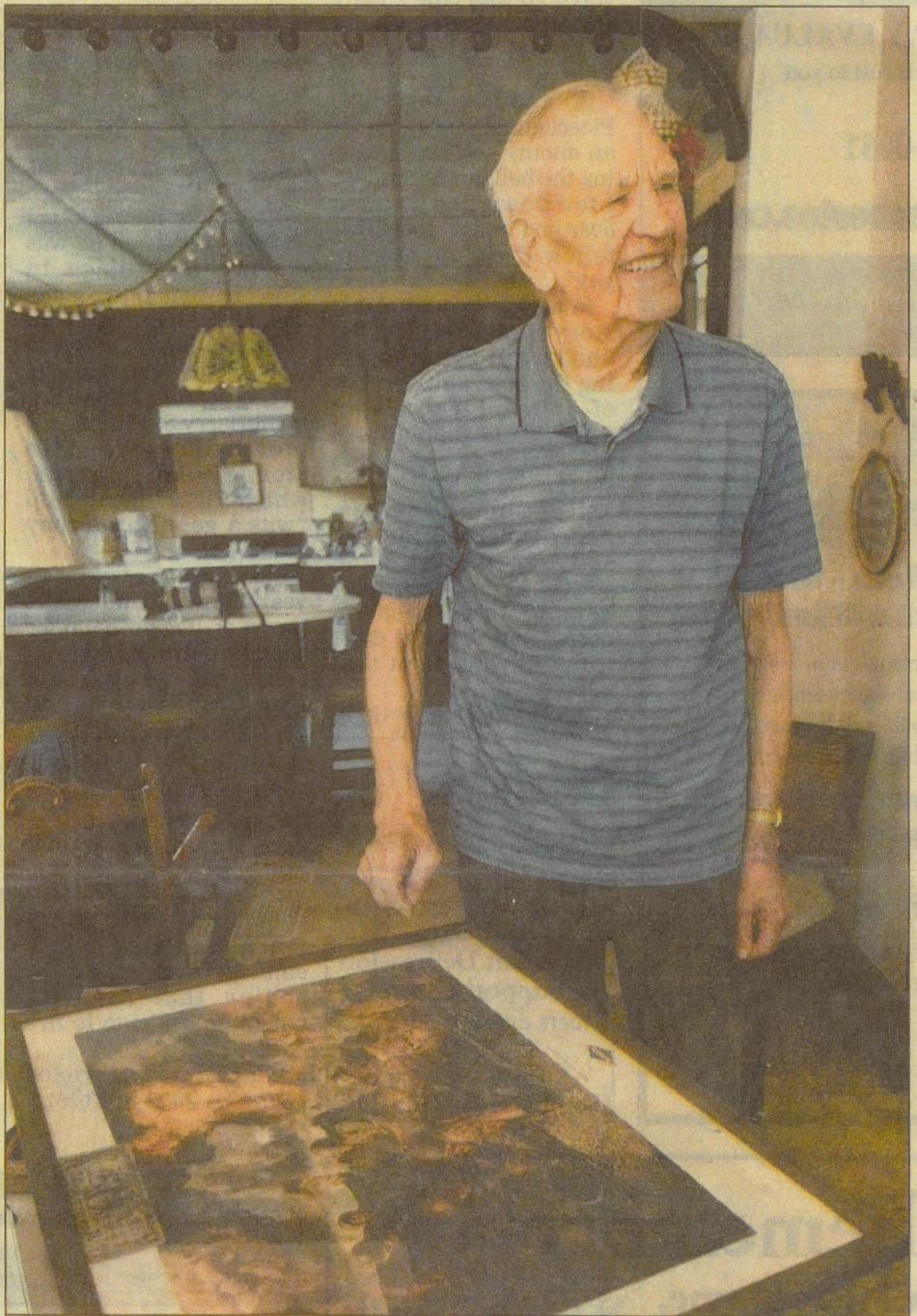
"What Eisenhower told us ... he was standing on the shoreline and we were on the boat," Ploeckelman recalled. "He said, 'This is it. Make room for the rest of us.'"

Ploeckelman and the rest of the Rangers took heed of Ike's order, and following the unit's motto, they led the way, spearheading the initial push into European soil and paving the way for 50,000 soldiers to make it onto Omaha Beach, and into Europe.

"Three o'clock in the morning, they woke us up and they said 'Get up' and they loaded us onto the landing crafts and told us to go," Ploeckelman, now 87, said.

The craft sailed slowly; it took about four hours to get up to the beach. In about a foot of water, the Rangers jumped from the boat and began walking to shore in the surprise attack. It was then when things got scary for Ploeckelman.

"The Germans had ma-



Leonard Ploeckelman of Sheboygan stands over a framed painting titled "Rangers Lead the Way" as he talks about his experiences 65 years ago at Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Photo by Sam Castro/The Sheboygan Press

chine guns and they were aiming at us," he said. "But they missed us so we went up and had a pipe bomb and blew up the (barbed) wire so we could get through."

The hole in the 8-foot barbed wire fence was the avenue for thousands of troops to get on the beach. The Rangers had done their jobs well, but there was much more work to

do.

Ploeckelman said he saw a pillbox, or a bunker, where the enemy was lurking, and he "pulled a bunch of guys over and we cleaned it out ... we threw a grenade in there."

Chaos reigned, in the midst of firebombs, machine gun and rifle fire, and the tremendous noise, but Ploeckelman

tried to stay calm.

"Everybody was on their own," he said. "If you saw something you didn't like, then you went for it. But there wasn't many trees there either. One place there was some trees and that's where the (barbed) wire went through and we blew that up right there, but that's

# D-Day

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when the fireworks started, after we went (through) the wire.”

Five thousand troops died during the invasion of Omaha Beach. Ploeckelman, amazingly, escaped unscathed — “I was tall and skinny, like now,” the lanky 6-footer said with a chuckle, but survival was a constant effort.

“You’d see some bullets coming and they’d go on one side and then the other side and you’d say, ‘What’s going on?’ and you’d go find (the enemy shooter). Or somebody (else) did,” Ploeckelman said.

In another instance, Ploeckelman encountered an enemy soldier “shoot-ing the hell out of me, and I fell down and I rolled over and one of them (his fellow Rangers) got the guy.”

In a 1994 account of his story published in The Sheboygan Press, marking the 50th anniversary of D-Day, Ploeckelman said he and the Rangers did what was necessary to survive.

“That night, the German airplanes lit up the sky like daylight and strafed us several times,” he told then-Press reporter Bob Vitale. “I don’t think anyone slept that night.”

Ploeckelman grew up in

Park Falls and moved to Sheboygan in 1939. He was drafted into the Army in 1942, and was shipped to England, where he volunteered for the Rangers. When he went into the Army, he saved a dollar bill, which he kept with him through the war.

Many years later, during a reunion of Ploeckelman’s Ranger unit, each of those attending received a print of a painting of the storming of Omaha Beach, showing blood and bombs and fire and the men struggling in the water to reach shore. It was signed by each of the surviving members of the unit, and Ploeckelman further personalized the painting by having his lucky dollar bill framed with it.

Ploeckelman served in Germany for much of the rest of the war, even called on to help protect Eisenhower when he was staying in a village. In 1945, the remaining members of his unit ended up at Camp Lucky Strike in France, and were about to be sent to Italy, when President Harry S. Truman approved the use of the atomic bomb in Japan, which Ploeckelman said “was a good thing they did.”

Ploeckelman’s wife of 63 years, Anita, said she is proud of her husband for what he did on D-Day.

“He did good,” said Anita, who turns 87 on

Sunday. “He never told me much about it and I didn’t ask too much, because he didn’t like to talk about it.”

Ploeckelman, who returned to Sheboygan and worked as a furniture maker at Thonet Industries for 30 years, looks back on D-Day as a day when he and the Rangers had a simple job to do, to help lead the way.

“I never give it much thought,” he said. “I never even thought it was historical. Those guys down there (in the Pacific) islands, they had to make landings all the time.”

Among Ploeckelman’s war mementos is a black-and-white photo of 16 men from his unit, taken at Camp Lucky Strike. He is standing to the left of the soldier holding the sign identifying the battalion. Most of the others from the original unit were either killed or wounded, some of them on Omaha Beach.

“You can’t think of it,” Ploeckelman said. “You see them guys lying on the beach and laying all over. They were human beings. What the heck, they’re fighting and they’re still fighting (today). I thought, I always said the end of this war (World War II) it would be the last of them.”

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# The Sheboygan

5 Sections, 60 Pages

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## D-Day Ranger

### He Was Among Those Who Led the Way

By **BOB VITALE**  
OF THE PRESS STAFF

**T**he men of the 5th Rangers still get together now and then, to catch up, to reminisce, to remember.

For a group that saw some of the worst fighting of World War II, it seems there would be much to relive. But the battles don't come up all that often.

And when the Rangers get together next week, 50 years after one of the most massive undertakings in military history, Leonard Ploeckelman expects it will be a lot like other gatherings.

"We just play cards," said the 72-year-old veteran from Sheboygan. "We talk about the good times."

On June 6, 1944 — D-Day — Leonard Ploeckelman and hundreds of other U.S. Army Rangers earned a lifetime of good times. They also earned a motto that has stuck with their battalion to this day.

"Lead the Way, Rangers."

D-Day for the Rangers started months before Ploeckelman and his



**REMINISCING:** Leonard Ploeckelman of Sheboygan holds a painting of the landing at Normandy done by a fellow member of the U.S. Army 5th Rangers. At the top of the painting is a dollar bill that Ploeckelman carried with him on D-Day. Ploeckelman still gets together with fellow Rangers now and then. — Press photo by Bruce Haimo

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# Ranger: Leading the way at Normandy

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cohorts ever laid eyes on the beaches of Normandy.

In the spring of 1944, when Ploeckelman joined the battalion, the unit was in England, practicing amphibious landings, cliff-scaling and most everything else it would be called upon to do for the Allies' eventual invasion of France.

They didn't know when that invasion would be, exactly, until June 1. That's when they boarded two British ships and headed out into the English Channel.

"When we got on the big boat, then we knew," Ploeckelman said.

Five days later, it was D-Day.

"About 3:30 a.m., we embarked to some (landing craft) to take the 10-mile ride to the beach. We hit Omaha Beach at about 7 a.m."

And the rest is history — history that still lives in D-Day's veterans, in the books on Leonard Ploeckelman's shelves, in a painting on his wall.

Painted by a fellow Ranger, it's not a pre-invasion snapshot of men wading ashore. It's not



**Leonard Ploeckelman in uniform in World War II**

a romantic war scene from black-and-white movies.

The bombs are exploding orange. The blood is red.

Ploeckelman said it pretty accurately captures the day he remembers on Omaha Beach, the day the Rangers led the way.

"We made it to the beach facing machine-gun fire and small-arms fire and a roll about 8 feet high of barbed wire," he said.

"But we had bangalore (an explosive device). A Ranger lit it under the barbed wire and made a big hole. We made it through while it was still smoking to find a big minefield and some more pillboxes and machine gun emplacements.

"We finally got up the hill, then the German artillery came down on the beach. We made it to the hedgerows and did what was necessary. That night, the German airplanes lit up the sky like daylight and strafed us several times.

"I don't think anyone slept until the next night."

A grateful nation gave Leonard Ploeckelman \$1.66 for his work on June 6, 1944.

One dollar and 66 cents — the U.S. Army's standard daily pay — was all a lot of men received for that day, D-Day.

Ploeckelman doesn't complain, but he's gotten a chuckle out of it for 50 years.

"We used to joke that we earned our money that day," he said.

