

D-Day on Omaha Red from the eyes of a Forward Observer

By William E. Smith

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He owned an insurance agency. He was a husband, and a son. Lt. William C. Smith Jr, known to everyone as "Smitty" had graduated from Ohio State in 1937 at the age of 20, and gotten his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant. He had seen war coming from the time he entered college, and signed up for ROTC. He was assigned to an artillery unit and was trained as a forward observer (FO) in the First Division—Big Red One. On his first day in the army, a Captain told him that if the army lost a box of ammunition, there would be trouble; but Second Lieutenants were expendable. The life expectancy of a FO was less than ten months. Nice duty.

A forward observer's job is simple. Just get close enough to the enemy to be able to tell what type of toothpaste they use, and tell the artillery units exactly where to aim their guns (and hope that they are accurate enough not to hit him). Smitty was an expert in invasions. He had been part of the invasion of North Africa and of Sicily and had the stars and ribbons to prove it.

The early afternoon in northern Sicily was bright and surprisingly cool. Bill had spent the morning doing what he usually did, joyriding in his jeep through enemy territory looking for targets. He had just come down from a small hill when Sampson, his driver, told him they were headed back to HQ. Sampson had gotten a call from the HQ staff to hightail it back to base. As Smitty climbed into the seat, he doubted it was a lunch invitation from the General.

They rolled back into camp about 13:30. Sampson dropped Smitty off in front of the General's tent, and parked the jeep. The majority of the chain of command was already there. The General handed him an envelope. The orders were for a new assignment when the Division returned to Britain. As he read the orders, everyone congratulated him. This was a great honor. He did not realize it at the time, but he had "volunteered" to be the typical army guinea pig, doing something that had never been done before. As he packed up to go, he figured the army must be pretty serious about this because he had been excused from all standard duty for the entire stay in Britain. The last thing that went into his duffel was his Bible. And it would be the first thing to be used when he arrived at his destination.

As the ship was packed prior to departure, Smitty's stuff, including his jeep, were the last things loaded. He knew that meant his stuff would be the first thing off the ship when it landed. The assignment would separate him from all the men with whom he had fought—even Sampson. Since the day the First had landed in North Africa, Sampson had been his constant companion. Smitty realized that he was really going to miss the men with whom he had fought across North Africa and a sizable chunk of Sicily. As the land disappeared below the horizon, he thought most about those that had left this earth defending their families, freedom, nation, and way of life from those that would take all that away. Those men had given the ultimate gift they had to offer with a willingness and devotion to honor and service that many could never understand. They had not started this war, but like their buddies that were still fighting, they were damned well going to finish it. They had just done what had been expected of them to the best of their ability in the service of their country.

As the ship pulled into port, Smitty looked out over the rail to the city beyond the dock. It was quite a change from Sicily. As he chuckled to himself as he disembarked. It was overcast, rainy, and cold—all in all, a nice afternoon in England. His jeep was the

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first thing off the ship. Even in all the confusion, Sampson found his rider. Sampson drove the jeep through the throng getting off the ship and almost knocked a General over getting to Smitty.

“Get in—you’re late!” A typical business trip, Smitty thought to himself. The second the ship lands, you are already behind schedule. The army was not about to allow any sight seeing this trip. In this case the hotel was a barracks with nine other guys there for exactly the same reason—they had been “volunteered” for this assignment too. One end of the barracks contained the usual bunks and footlockers. The other end had been converted into a classroom. A gigantic blackboard covered the entire end of the barracks.

“Gentlemen, I think the only travel the army has in mind for us is from the bed to the bathroom. From the looks of this classroom, we will need a hall pass to use it.” Smitty was exactly right.

At 23:00 hours, they got their first briefing from the brass. The army and the navy were working together to train just ten of them, all from the army, including him. Smitty had called fire for everything from infantry, to tanks, to 75 and 105-millimeter howitzers. Now he and these other nine volunteers were going to school to learn to do something no one had ever done before. They were going to be trained to fire the guns of battleships and other attack ships in support of the American, Canadian, and British invasion of Normandy France.

The best part was the assignment after their training was complete. These 10 men would go to shore in rubber rafts in the dark of night say two hours before the invasion, find a cozy little place where they could see the 150,000 German soldiers, safe and warm in their reinforced concrete bunkers. The Brass had totally overlooked the fact that if the FO’s could see the Germans, the Germans and all their firepower could see the FOs. At first light, the FOs would use a radio to let the gunners on board the ships know where the bad guys were. They were told by the Brass to take good care of the radios.

“Men are replaceable, but these are the only ten radios we have” joked one of the instructors. Of course it never occurred to the brass that the bad guys were everywhere and they were armed to the teeth. The Germans were not exactly representing the Normandy Travel Bureau. The brass assured the men that the airforce would blow up as much of the enemy’s accommodations as possible in the days leading up to the invasion. One of the FOs commented that bombing targets this well protected would only manage to “really piss the Germans off.”

There were just a couple of challenges. First, no one had ever done this before. Even more interesting, no one had ever trained anyone to do this before. The instructors had done the best job they could to figure out exactly how to teach the ten men how to do it. There would be a final exam. It would come as they challenged the guns of the Germans during the actual invasion. If the professors had done a good job, these men could save tens of thousands of Allied lives. If not, it was going to be a long bloody day.

The training started with the pupils learning about the guns for which they were going to be calling fire. The FOs had to know how to instruct the gunners to retarget in a language that the navy men would understand. The pupils also had to learn what kind of damage each type of shell could do. They would be calling fire on everything from a

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destroyer escort 6-inch shell to the 16-inch shell of the Missouri class battlewagons. The new language that was significantly different from the way they instructed army artillery gunners. They used parts of some of the navy books about the equipment and targeting as texts. Both the teachers and students were learning as they went. After a few days covering the sending part of the task, they had to learn the receiving part of the project.

There was another aspect of firing ship guns that did usually not occur when ordering fire from land artillery. If a land artillery piece had been properly dug in, it would not move. The adjustment would only be to the shot, not to a new location of the shooter. Ships were different. Even the great battleships would move in the water when they fired a volley from their sixteen-inch guns. There was yet another little problem that had to be worked out. The Germans would not welcome incoming fire of sixteen-inch rounds from the ships with open arms. The Allied Brass had a pretty good idea that the ships would be the target of fire too. That meant that the ships would have to change position after firing to avoid being hit by return fire. The gunners on the ships were going to have to adjust the calls from the FO to account for this change of position of the guns. The FOs had no way of knowing exactly where the ships were located at any point in time.

The targets the Allies would be facing were very different from the typical on land target. When you blow up a tank or an artillery piece in the field, it does not matter how the shell gets there as long as it hits the target. That was not the case with the targets defending the beaches of the Normandy invasion. The majority of enemy guns were shielded within a concrete pillbox. How hard was this going to be? Visualize a typical sized hatbox with a slit running parallel to the rim on one side measuring about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch tall by ten inches long. Now, from a distance of 400 feet, see if you could toss a small stone projectile into the hole. From a distance of 400 feet, you would be lucky to see the slit, let alone put a shot into it. Now, to make it a more accurate example, see if you can instruct someone wearing a blindfold to toss the projectile into the slit successfully. This example approximates the problem that Smitty and the others faced. Not only did the shot have to be exactly on the right spot, but the arch of the shot had to be perfect as well to get the shell into the pillbox to knock out the resistance. This was going to take practice. It was going to take a lot of practice.

The training process started simply enough. The navy had mounted pictures of the actual German embattlements that were enlarged to approximate the view the men would have from the beach below the cliffs where the pillboxes were located. The men looked at these fortifications in awe. In some cases, the pillboxes were covered with several yards of dirt. That would protect them from the overhead bombing that was supposed to soften up the target. Other emplacements were caves cut into the granite face of the cliff. With the yards of cold gray foreboding stone on every side of the emplacement, it would take a horizontal trajectory directly into the cave to have any effect at all on the occupants.

Each FO would call a shot and the navy instructors would then point a flashlight to the spot on the picture where the shell would have landed. It was then up to the FO to

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call back an adjustment to the aim of the gun. This exercise on went every day until the instructor's arm was ready to fall off from pointing to the picture.

The next step was a little more interesting. The FOs got to play with model houses. Based on aerial photography, the army had built a scale model of the city that would also be a target for bombardment. They were given binoculars that made the town look farther away than normal. This was also to give the pupils as close an approximation to the view they would have in action as possible. The practice routine was similar to the pictures on the wall. The FO would call the shot and the instructor's flashlight would pinpoint the spot where it would have hit. They practiced in the rain, the cold and even the dark. They practiced for days and days. The process was effective. One of the FOs talked in his sleep. He was calling fire between snores.

Smitty was in some ways similar to the other members of the team, but in other ways he was different. He was a little older, at 27 than most of the others. He smoked a pipe. That was a strategic choice. Most of the men smoked cigarettes and found it difficult to get a reasonable supply. Because there were far fewer pipe smokers, pipe tobacco was much easier to get. Beside, the pipe smokers were much more introspective than cigarette smokers. That also said a lot about the man. While he was very personable and very much at ease when talking to individuals or groups, he was also very introspective.

There were only three activities Smitty was committed to outside of his study. Sleep had to take third place on his list of priorities. Sleep, when it came at all, occurred only after he had completed the other two tasks. Smitty's first priority was his time reading the Bible. He did this every night without fail. The second was writing letters. His letters to his wife and father showed the depth of both his intellect and his concern for his fellow soldiers. In a letter to his father, he could not disclose what he was going to be doing, but did write about his total focus to do his job well enough to save the lives of his buddies. He understood what an overwhelming responsibility he and the other FOs had been given. He had seen the cost in human life, both Allied and Axis, of the invasions of North Africa and Sicily. He was trying to prepare himself and the group for the carnage they would face. The more he learned about the German defenses, the clearer became his imagination about how costly this invasion would be. The Germans had been assembling their defenses for three years. There would be thousands of good men that would pay the ultimate price to help free France from the clutches of a mad man.

A combination of bad weather and an angry English Channel made the choice of an invasion day difficult. The team of ten kept practicing eighteen hours a day every day for weeks. Once the training was over, they were assigned to Military Police duty. They could not be involved in any other preparations for the invasion. They would not be part of the invasion. They would get on the beach first. Smitty and the other FO's continued to study on their own right up the day of preparation for the invasion. They finally got the word, the invasion would be on June 6, 1944 known forever more as D-Day. The group met one more time as they waterproofed everything they could and packed for the trip. There were precious few words exchanged. The group shook hands and wished

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each other good luck. Smitty prayed for this group to be successful. If they were, it would be because God had helped their cause.

The ride to the point of departure was anything but smooth. The relatively shallow Channel was so choppy that even experienced navy men were dangling over the rail of the depositing a portion of their most recent meal with extreme prejudice. Smitty was deep in his own thoughts reviewing each action in his mind. The commander of the LCI from which the raft would be launched walked over and put his hand on Smitty's shoulder.

"It's time. God be with us all." He patted Smitty on the back and left. The ink black night showed no signs of either moon or stars. No exterior lights were permitted for security as Smitty made his way across the deck and down the rope ladder to his ride. What had been described as a raft was an overgrown truck inner tube with a thin rubber bottom and a cheap electric fan converted to what was supposed to be a motor. Four men were in this "boat". The other three were navy frogmen whose assignment was to remove the anti-ship steel barricades installed by the Germans. These were designed to hang up the Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) and Landing Ship Tanks (LST) that would be bringing both men and equipment onto the beach. Smitty checked to make sure he had his sidearm and extra shells. Then a thought hit him like a truck. What good is a pistol going to do against all those Germans with all that heavy firepower?

It seemed to take hours to get to the beach. In reality, the trip was only about twenty minutes. The entire trip was made in total silence. Each man was deep in thought and prayer about completing his individual contribution to the effort to come. The instant the rubber raft bounced onto the beach, Smitty jumped off and got off to the side of the landing area and away from the base of the cliff as he could while getting a good view of the bunkers which were his targets. He dug a shallow foxhole in the sand that would be his only protection from the fire of the enemy. As Smitty looked up, he could see a few lights in the bunkers. He felt somewhat more comfortable because of the similarity between the training pictures and the actual targets. Now, all there was to do was wait. He flattened the sand in an arch around his position. He marked a line from the source of each light back to his position. He would later be able to use these to target the enemy.

The morning of June 6, 1944 was so gray that the sky would not disclose where it ended and the sea began. When there was finally enough light so that he could see, he took one glance out to the Channel. There were so many ships assembled that one observer would later note that 'it looked like you could walk across the Channel stepping from one ship to another.' He could only afford the time for a single glance toward the Channel. He then looked up at the embattlements. **THEY WERE PERFECT—UNTOUCHED BY THE BOMBING!** The bombing that had taken place the night before was supposed to destroy the German's ability to fend off the invasion. Either the bombing had missed the targets all together, or it had no effect what so ever.

He realized in an instant that unless he could call enough fire to silence the guns in those pillboxes, this part of the invasion would not succeed. He registered his first target and gave the order to fire when ready. The second the first shell hit, the Germans began looking on the beach for anything that looked American. Since he was going to be the only American on Omaha Red for while, he thought he might be the target for the

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entire German army in this sector on the beach. He had long ago resolved himself to the near certainty of his own death. He was going to call fire as long as he had a single breath in his body. He would leave his own fate, and thus the fate of many of those coming ashore in his sector, to God. In that second, he asked only that God look out for them. As usual, there was no thought of his personal safety. On this day God certainly had more important things to think about than him. On this day, Bill had more important things to think about than that. The Germans chose to send most of their focus to the ships. He had to move several times during the morning.

For the next eight hours, he called one shot after another pausing only to see where the shot hit before registering the next volley. One emplacement was still pristine. Because it had not returned any fire, Smitty had ignored it. Suddenly, every orifice of the embattlement spouted a gun blasting the hell out of our men. He called a shot and the arch was just short. The shell fell just below the opening in the cliff from which the fire was coming. As he started to register his next shot, the voice on the other side of the radio said the second most beautiful phrase he had ever heard. 'We see it. Stand by!' The only other phrase that was more beautiful was the words "I do" that his childhood sweetheart, Berniece Kissinger, had said at their wedding. This one-second recall of the best moment in his life was over. At that instant two streams of tracer shells painted the opening for the larger fire. In the next second nearly a half a dozen shells seemed to converge on a single spot—the exact location of the offending gunfire. A glorious rain of concrete dust, gun parts, and chunks of medium well German gunners fell down on the sand at the foot of the cliff. But there was no time for celebration. There was only time to register fire on the next target.

There were thousands of deaths all around him. So much Allied blood flowed that the water and the beach it touched turned red with the essence of the brave men that had fallen in the cause of freedom. Each death took a little piece of his heart with them. But there was no time to even grieve. There was not even time to notice. There was only time to register the next shot. While the tanks supposed to add fire to the ships sank in the Channel because the LST's could not get close enough to the beach, he called fire. While the units that had landed on the beach were pinned down by fire from the cliff, he called fire. While his position was strafed again and again with machinegun fire in retribution for the navel shells that he had directed at the Germans, he called fire. Although he was totally exhausted and almost hoarse, he called fire.

He called fire until the return fire stopped completely. This did not happen all at once. It occurred over time as one by one, the enemy emplacements were destroyed or abandoned. There were three targets, then two, then only one. It was over. The Allies had taken the beach, despite the horrible losses. He turned his radio off and for the first time since first light, looked around him. In that second, he first said a prayer for those brave, brave men that had fallen in service to their nation, and their God. He then said a thank you prayer. Not a prayer to thank God for his own survival, but to thank God for allowing him to do his job to save as many lives as possible.

He moved out and rejoined his unit. The fighting would go on for nearly a year. Many more would die on both sides. But on this one day, these men, both living and

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dead, had turned the tide of the war toward the victory of the Allies. They had accomplished what the Germans felt was impossible. They had accomplished what even many of the Allies brass had feared was impossible. But they had accomplished it, despite the fact that the bombing had missed the targets, despite all the other obstacles that had been in their way.

For his bravery, Smitty was awarded the Bronze Star with a V for valor. One day he would mention it to his family. That day occurred 45 years after the day it was won. Is he proud of what he did during the war? Probably, but he still will not admit that.

“Just like thousands of others during the war, I did what needed to be done. I just did my job.” This was as close as he ever came to blowing his own richly deserving horn. In a speech before a committee of military and civilian leaders, he joked that he was ‘glad to be here. Hell, I’m glad to be anywhere.’ He lived to see the end of the war. Just after he got into Germany, he received the orders that would send him home. As he was preparing for the flight, he smiled. Hitler had said that the only way any American would ever stand on German ground was as a prisoner of war. He sure as blazes was not a prisoner. He was going home to help in the preparation of the invasion of Japan.

Before he was shipped to the Pacific Theater, the A-bombs were dropped and the war was over. He used the same level of dedication and effort to build a family business that supported over 80 families. Today, at 86, Smitty can still wear his 1945 uniform. He is a remarkable man. He is and always has been my hero, my mentor, and my idol. I am lucky enough to be his son.

Thank you Dad for everything you have done for all of us.
Love, always and forever, Bill