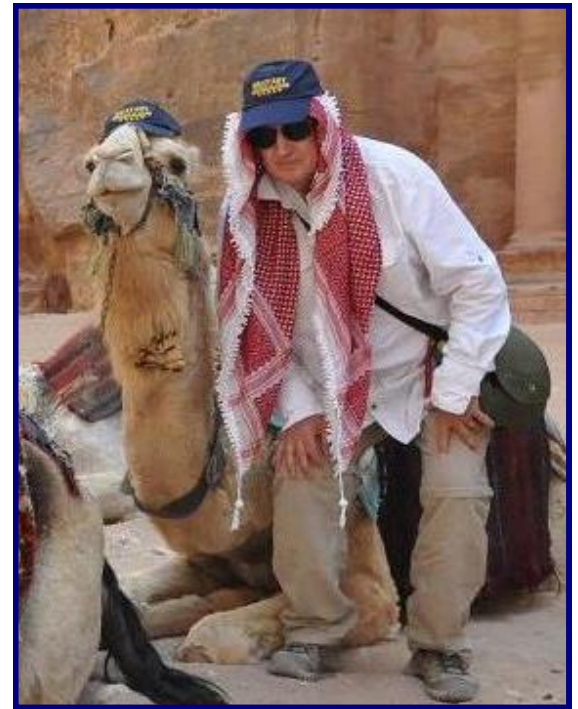


# IN THE PRESENCE OF HEROES

By LTC Gary Andrejak USAF(Ret)



As I conclude my 16 years of planning and leading group tours for Military Historical Tours, Inc., I cannot help but reflect on how fortunate I have been to be given the chance to visit an incredible array of historical sites around the globe with some incredible people. I have been honored to spend days with Medal of Honor recipients from WWII, Korea and Vietnam, General Officers including former Commandants of the Marine Corps and the wonderful families of the veterans. Most of all it has been a pleasure and honor to be with the veterans themselves. Truly, I have been in the presence of heroes!



2019 marks the 75th Anniversary of the Normandy D-Day invasion to liberate Europe and bring to an end this part of the global nightmare we call the Second World War. On 6 June 2019, millions around the world will turn their attention to D-Day and thousands will travel to Normandy to walk those landing beaches where the sacrifices of many brave young men changed the course of history.

Over the years I have been fortunate to have accompanied several dozen D-

Day veterans and their families back to those beaches. Sadly, the number of WWII veterans still alive is fast dwindling. On my D-Day visits I have met some of the heroes among heroes that are special to me and with whom I have shared some very personal memories.

**Here are four of them:**



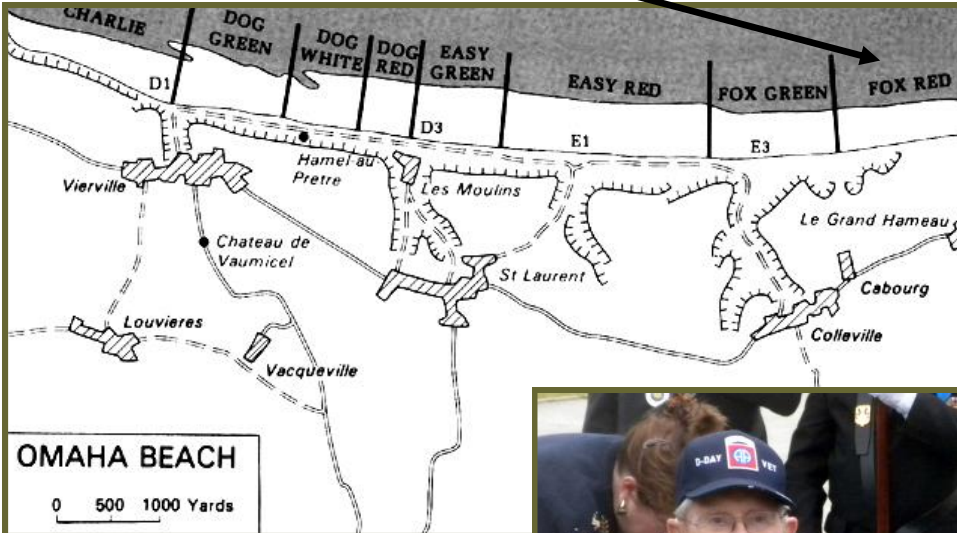
*Clockwise from Top Right: The Author & Friend in Jordan; Above the landing beach in Gallipoli, Turkey; Checking out the C-47 Skytrain cockpit in Normandy; providing knowledge on D-Day; & at Gen Patton's gravesite.*



## Sergeant Major Robert Blatnik

### 26th Infantry, 1st Division.

The SgtMaj was already a seasoned, combat veteran of North Africa, Sicily and Italy when he landed in the first wave on Omaha Beach, Fox Red One, on 6 June 1944.



Daughters of World War Two (DWWII) is a non-profit group, co-founded by Laura Leppert, wife of the former Mayor of Dallas. They have a program called "Wings of Freedom" that provides North Texas World War II veterans the chance to return to the battlefields of their youth where many of their friends made the ultimate sacrifice.



All expenses are paid for by private and corporate donors. In 2013 and 2014, MHT asked me to organize and lead group tours of their veterans back to Normandy. SgtMaj Blatnik was on both visits proudly wearing his original WWII uniform with his many decorations.



I learned that the SgtMaj had never been back to Fox Red One since that fateful day of 6 June 1944 where nearly two-thirds of his regiment were casualties. I was determined to take him there again. So, several weeks prior to the tour, I drove to Normandy on my own to check out his beach only to discover that the shore road stopped short of Fox Red One and we would



have about three hundred yards to walk down the beach. The problem was that the SgtMaj was in a wheelchair. I asked him that with help did he think he could use a walker on the hard sand at low tide? His response was that if he had to crawl, he wanted to go to his beach! Well, he made it those three hundred yards and I explained where I thought he had landed and where his unit's initial objective was located.

To everyone's astonishment, this 94 year old D-Day veteran got down on his hands and knees on this rocky beach and prayed aloud for all his men who were lost coming ashore so long ago!!! It was truly a spiritual experience.



In early 2018 back home in Texas, the SgtMaj fell and broke his hip just a couple of weeks before his 98th birthday. I am happy to report that he has fully recovered and is looking forward to the D-Day 75th Anniversary at the age of 99!!

Bless you, Sergeant Major!!!!

## PFC Ormand “Jerry” Knowles

Guard Patrol Unit/Security Supply Depot, 3rd Army (Patton)



Jerry was also on the 2013 and 2014 DWWII tours. On the first tour, he and I were having a typically wonderful French lunch in a small restaurant in Bayeux when Jerry casually asked if the tour would be going anywhere near Reims, France? I told him unfortunately no, but why he did he ask? It turns out that he was on night guard duty on 7 May 1945 at the railyard in Reims next to General Eisen-



hower’s headquarters. Little did he know but that was the day the Germans surrendered to Eisenhower in that headquarters. Jerry described to me that at around 2 am all the lights came on (very unusual) and they learned that WWII in Europe was OVER! Hostilities were declared ended the next day, 8 May 1945...“V



-E Day!”

Jerry brought his wife, Eve, with him on the 2014 tour. DWWII wanted to include the Battle of the Bulge in the itinerary in addition to Normandy. Since I did the route planning, I made sure that it would include a stop in Reims. Ike’s former headquarters is now a small museum called Musée de la Reddition. Of course in 1944 Jerry would have never been allowed in the building, so I wanted him to see the actual room and table where the surrender was signed.





While we were there, a French teacher brought his class of elementary students to the museum on a field trip. I told him Jerry's story and he explained it in French to the students. They immediately surrounded Jerry wanting him to autograph their school notebooks and shake his hand. It was like having a "rock star" among us! Off to the side against the wall stood Eve...with tears of pride and joy streaming down her cheeks.

I kept in touch with Jerry and Eve over the years since and a few months ago I learned that Jerry had fallen in his bedroom at home, hit his head and died. He was 94 years old. The date was 8 May 2018. Yes, "V-E Day"....74 years, to the day, when Jerry saw the lights come on at Eisenhower's Headquarters in Reims.



## PFC Aaron "Al" Gitelman

### 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry, 29th Division

Al was with me on the 2013 DWWII D-Day Tour. On D-Day he came ashore on the 4th wave and landed on Beach Dog Green.



His 90th birthday just so happened to be during our tour on 4 June. We thought it would be fitting to mark it with a cake in his honor. So, we stopped our bus overlooking Dog Green, I got him with a bag of sand from

his beach and all of us celebrated this special day with him...where he waded ashore on D-day...69 years and two days before.

Sadly, Al's health began to decline in 2014 and he passed away on 21 May 2014, two weeks short of his 91st birthday. He had requested a quiet, private cere-



mony which was held at the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery on 6 June 2014, the 70th Anniversary of the D-Day landings.



## Sgt William “Bangs” Tosline

### 25th Marines, 4th Marine Division

Bangs was on a couple of my MHT tours to Iwo Jima and we became friends. You probably know that in WWII the battles in Europe, including D-Day in Normandy, were fought by the US Army and the island-hopping Pacific battles were fought by the U.S. Marine Corps. When I saw his name on the D-Day participant roster in 2008, I asked him why? Here is the story:



Bangs' boyhood friend growing up in Willes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was Charles McGroarty. They lived on the same street and

they both were called “Junior.” When WWII started, Bangs enlisted in the Marine Corps and Charles went into the Army. They never saw each other again. Bangs fought in the battles for Saipan/Tinian and was severely wounded on Iwo Jima. Bangs told me that Charles was killed in Normandy and that was about all he knew. While he was able, he wanted to go to Normandy as a tribute to the memory of his boyhood friend and all the troops that came ashore on D-Day, 1944.



One aspect of being an MHT tour leader which I found very rewarding was the “detective” work I often did in piecing together the stories of the veterans I was honored to be with on tour. I just had to find out what happened to Charles, but all I had was a name. Over the next six months I tried a number of sources, but came up empty. Then I had the idea to look at the WWII casualty records of the Pennsylvania county in which the two had grown up. I found him! The name I had been given had a couple letters transposed and with the proper spelling, I pressed on.



Pvt. Charles McGroarty, 120th Infantry Division, 30th Division, came ashore on Omaha Beach on D-Day + 1 and was killed in action on July 11, 1944, during a German counter-attack near St. Lô. To my surprise, I also discovered that he was buried in the Normandy American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach! Bangs was bowled over with the news.



Our tour group participated in the D-Day Anniversary Commemoration on 6 June 2008 at the Cemetery. It was a hot day and Bangs wasn't doing too well in the heat. I got him a wheelchair. There were many WWII "reenactors" at the ceremony, almost all French. I introduced Bangs to a young couple dressed in authentic US Army uniforms of 1944...he as a US Army 1st Division combat medic and she as a US Army nurse. They didn't speak a word of English, but when I mentioned Iwo Jima and introduced them to Bangs, they both came to attention and saluted Bangs! Bangs summed up his strength, got up from his wheelchair and rendered a crisp USMC salute in return! There were a couple hundred people observing the scene in utter amazement.

I then wheeled Bangs to Charles' gravesite. I personally believe that we were the first specific visitors to his grave since he was laid to rest 64 years prior. I had brought along a USMC Globe and Anchor collar insignia and we buried it at the foot of his cross. Bangs told the group the story and ended with this: "Well Junior, it won't be long now and we will be together again." Bangs passed away in his sleep on 8 October 2010. He was 87. Semper Fi, Marine!"...**Our First Duty Is To Remember...**"

