

Commemoration-70th Anniversary Liberation of Jouarre

August 27, 2014

I would like to thank Mother Abbess David Serna and Mother Margaret Georgina Patton for this opportunity to share some ideas with you today; how it felt to be part of the D-Day Invasion, how the violence and death of that day contributed in a way to the formation of this peaceful abbey of Regina Laudis, and the relationship between the religious and military evident today.

When I was a young boy in Rosedale/Laurelton, Queens County, NYC, I watched the parades that were held on Memorial Day, May 30th or Armistice Day, Nov. 11th. I vividly remember that leading the parades were several veterans from the Civil War. I was inspired and awestruck. Interestingly, today, it is longer since WWII (70 years) than it was from my childhood days to the Civil War (65 years). My father and four of my uncles were veterans of WWI and I sat enthralled at the stories they told and their part in them. In 1941, I was a sophomore in St. John's College in Brooklyn when FDR declared War the day after Pearl Harbor, and I realized it was now my turn. It was a honor and responsibility to serve this country which had given all of us so much. My father and his brother, my own brothers and six of my cousins were soon in the Navy, my father's ancestors had owned a few small privateers that served the east coast from Maine to Virginia so I had to join the Navy. I entered an accelerated program and immediately on graduation was directed to report to Midshipman School in Chicago. I was to be a "Ninety-Day Wonder", actually one month as Apprentice seaman and three months as Midshipman. In jest, we called ourselves "the secret weapon". Although I put in for destroyer duty I was assigned to the US Navy Amphibious Forces and told to report to USS LCI(L) 527 which had just been built in Barber, New Jersey and commissioned just 5 days before. The Navy definition of a ship is a vessel that can't be carried on another vessel. An LCI, Landing Craft Infantry was a 385 ton ship that was 160 ft. long with a beam of 23 ft. It had a flat bottom, no

keel, which made steering generally difficult. But a ship with a keel could not beach to debark troops. We operated in groups of six ships which could land a Battalion. When transporting troops each ship carried a Company or 200 men, who could exist aboard for maximum 5 days due to space, food and water. For beaching, the ship had a draft 3ft forward and 5ft. aft. For sea voyages, even loaded, it bobbed around like a cork in rough weather. We didn't know it right away but it was very seaworthy when no troops were aboard and rigged for the ocean with full tanks. The range of the ship was 8,000 miles. With no troops aboard there was plenty of room for the crew of 23 men and four officers.

We went to sea, on Feb. 13th, 1944 headed for England by way of a three day stop at Horta in the Azores and arrived in Falmouth, England on March 8th. No one, officers or men had been to sea before. It was a learning experience. Half of the crew was just out of boot camp, we had 5 petty officers, 3 of them 3/c. Two severe storms on the voyage gave us confidence in our ship and showed what we had to do to become sailors. We had a ship and crew when we reached England after 23 days. We knew it would be soon and we were waiting for the Invasion to begin

Almost every American service woman or man wanted to see action and fight for his or her country because in those days we felt freedom so intensely. On our minds was the thought that our way of life was seriously threatened. Where one ended up was the luck of the draw, to what and where you were assigned.

I can remember on the 3rd of June, as we loaded troops in Dartmouth, England that the invasion of mainland Europe was now and it was time to put up. I was anxious and scared, I hadn't seen any action but a few air raids and when at the end of April, in 'Operation Tiger', the practice run for the invasion, some German E-Boats (like our PT boats) got through the destroyer picket line and sank three fully loaded LSTs part of our practice flotilla with the loss of over 900 American lives, just 15 miles away but we were hardly involved.

At this point I would like to note that just a few months ago we celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy. Every operation in the war had a D-Day, and H-Hour, the "D" for the day and the "H" for the hour or time when the operation was

to begin. The term “D-Day” is now mostly associated with the Normandy landings.

So back to 1944, that day as dawn broke the enemy coast of France was right in front of us, about 15 miles away. We were to beach on Utah beach which was not nearly as violent and bloody as Omaha Beach, which was just a few miles to the East. But I thanked God that I was there. I was participating in one of the great events in World History and willing to take my chances on the outcome. God gave me the opportunity to fight for my country and all those people and things I held dear, I thanked Him. Most of my shipmates felt the same way, but then this was our first bit of action. The invincibility of youth may have been a reason. The mix of fear, bravery and dedication was everywhere. We were shot at but from a distance and inconsistently. There were many mines along the beach and en route to the beach an LCT, a British Trawler and a PC guide ship were sunk with the bows sticking out of the water. One of our six ships was hit, a few wounded but no fatalities

I’ve always had a very special regard for those that we carried and landed—for what they went through, for all that we in the Navy went through right up until the landing. Once off the ship, they had to walk all the way to Germany, getting shot at along the way. Funny thing, they couldn’t get off the ship fast enough, they said they couldn’t dig a foxhole on a ship. The differences in training were evident. The soldiers on board couldn’t wait to get off the ship and dig a hole for security, the sailors couldn’t wait to get off the beach and into open water. We survived that day with gratitude for God’s gift of life, with some bitter and some inspiring memories, and some we were eager to forget. We had a new outlook on life especially how strong but fragile it could be. The violence, struggles, heroism, and sacrifice of that day have been detailed in many books, films and documentaries, everyone involved has a touching story but for me, not today. Instead, I would like to pose a few thoughts to consider.

I like to think that those who took part in the invasion as well as the 12,000 Allied Airman that were lost in the preparative bombing raids on the mainland in April and May, 1944, the 2,499 fatalities including 238 Airborne on the beaches and the combat area, the 73,000 Americans

who were put ashore that day, as well as all who followed and could not realize or fathom all the good they accomplished by their sacrifices. In our Commemoration today, we acknowledge Gen. George S. Patton Jr.'s Third Army as the primary liberators of Jouarre. I submit that every one who took part in the liberation of mainland Europe contributed in part to the liberation of Jouarre and the formation of this Abbey of Regina Laudis. For it was really the exhilaration of freedom felt by Mother Benedict, Vera Duss, that liberation day, that made her hear, more clearly, the call of the Spirit to bring this remarkable expansion of the ministry of Jouarre to Bethlehem Connecticut. We thank God for Mother Benedict's efforts and the efforts so apparent that occur here for all of us every day.

When I first came to Regina Laudis through the courtesy of The Abbess, Dave Smith and Sister Lioba, I was gifted and honored to meet Mother Irene Boothroyd, who was responsible for the Abbey Infirmary. She had been an Army nurse who had landed on Utah Beach in Normandy. She was assigned to a field hospital. If you've seen MASH on TV, her station was even closer to the front lines. She and her group operated under very trying physical, mental and logistical situations. They handled those who couldn't make it to the two hospital ships anchored just off the beach or the base hospitals in England, a day away by ship. Every few days they had to take down and pack up everything into their trucks and move on a few miles and set up again, operating room, recovery, triage etc. These efforts continued for at least 10 more months and until they reached Czechoslovakia. Such things as evacuation helicopters had not come into use. Air evacuation was rare, since the only airfields set up after several days were for fighter aircraft.

Mother Irene had made the first of her life-offering commitments in joining the Army Nurse Corps. We know what Jesus said, several times, "Greater love hath no man than he lay down his life for a friend". Many service personnel were willing to do this, for their buddies, for their country, for their families and friends, and loved ones left behind. Those that give their lives for strangers or their enemies are even more gifted.

I want you to think about this however, Mother Irene, after the war, then made another life-offering commitment, similar in some respects, to her military one but more profound and comprehensive and to the highest human spiritual level. This time, she joined this Abbey and offered herself completely to God for the good of all others. There is no doubt Mother Irene had a vested interest in this Abbey. Mother Irene went back to God a little over a year ago.

The relationship regarding the "Greater love" aspect between religious commitments and military enlistment is very striking. There are great differences to be sure, the military do not take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and to a great extent, still live in this world. But they know that their efforts are often vital, require sacrifice and have consequences.

Finally, to the Benedictines among us today and those who have gone before, your willingness to sacrifice everything for the good of humanity is not only between yourself and God. There are many of us who know how necessary it is, especially in today's world. The world needs you, we need you. You never forget us, let us never forget you..

Some facts: Allied troops landed on D-Day:156,000; US 73,000, (Utah 23,250, Omaha 34,250, Airborne and Gliders 15,500)

Total Allied vessels 6,939: Warships T. 1213 US 321

Landing Craft T3261 US 865

53,000 US Sailors; 850 US landing ships.