

“A Night to Remember,” or, “The Night Before Christmas”:

The Sinking of the SS Leopoldville

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Indianapolis Literary Club

November 20, 2017

INTRODUCTION

The 66th Division was activated on April 15, 1943 at Camp Blanding, Florida. Its commander, Major General Herman F. Kramer, continued with the division until August 1945 when he was relieved by Major General Walter F. Lauer. The 66th Division was part of the Sixth Army Group and participated in the Northern France campaign.

The division trained three months at Camp Blanding, Florida, moved to Camp Joseph Robinson near Little Rock, Arkansas, and subsequently was sent to Camp Rucker, Alabama. In November 1944 the division moved to Camp Shanks, New Jersey, its final stop before being shipped overseas. Part of the division sailed for England on November 15, 1944 aboard the *George Washington* and the *George O. Squier* and the rest of the division sailed on the *HMS Britannic* on December 1, 1944. While in England the division was billeted in small towns and barracks in the County of Dorset on the southern coast of England.

The 66th Division consisted of the following units: 262nd, 263rd, and 264th Infantry Regiments, Headquarters Battery, 721st, 870th, 871st, and 872nd Field Artillery Battalions, 266th Engineer Combat Battalion, the 366th Medical Battalion, 66th Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment, 66th Quartermaster Company, 66th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, the 566th Signal Company, and Headquarters Special Troops, including a Headquarters Company and a Military Police Platoon.

A RAW RECRUIT

In the quiet of the early evening of December 7, 1941 my father, Harold M. Coons, and mother, Margaret Richman Coons, along with my brother, Stephen, or Stevie, as they called him, age six months, were warmly ensconced in their bungalow on Riverview Drive in Indianapolis. Suddenly their peace was shattered by a radio announcement that would forever change their lives. Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Subsequently, the United States declared war on Japan and Germany.

Since my father was age 30 at the time, married, and with one child, he was not drafted, nor did he enlist. However, as WWII dragged on and the casualties mounted, older fathers were drafted. In order to avoid being drafted, and perhaps go in as an officer, my father applied to the United States Navy but received his rejection notice in April, 1943. The reasons for his rejection

were listed as being under weight and nearsighted. He eventually received his draft notice on December 20, 1943. Apparently by this time the United States Army was far less choosy.

On February 9, 1944 at 1600 hours my father left Indianapolis on a troop train. In a letter to my mother he wrote:

“A troop train is an experience. The place most free of smoke was the smoking room. The Pullman was frequently like a poolroom. There were a number of Kentuckians in the outfit and their speech was picturesque and profane.” (February 9, 1944)

Bound for Fort Bragg, North Carolina for his basic training, he did not arrive until 300 hours two days later in the cold and rain.

Fort Bragg was initially named Camp Bragg after Confederate General Braxton Bragg. It was constructed in 1918 and situated near Fayetteville, North Carolina. During WWII infantry and armored units trained there as did the 82nd Airborne Division.

Dad was at Fort Bragg from mid-February, 1944 till nearly the end of June, 1944. Basic training began with a series of films and lectures and progressed to the field with calisthenics, running the obstacle course, training on the rifle range, grenade throwing, and training on the 105 mm howitzer. Dad wrote of his drill sergeant:

Sgt. Winkosky’s “favorite way of starting a sentence is, ‘Goddamnit soldier!’ and it all sounds like one word.” (May 21, 1944)

Following basic training at Fort Bragg, my father was transferred, by troop train again, to Camp Rucker, Alabama.

Camp Rucker was opened in May, 1942 and was named after Confederate General Edmund Rucker. It is about equally distant from Dothan, Enterprise, and Ozark, Alabama. During WWII the 35th, 66th, 81st, and 98th Divisions trained there. Camp Rucker was renamed Fort Rucker in 1955 and is now home to United States Army aviation.

After arriving at Camp Rucker in late June, 1944, Dad repeated some of his basic training. Subsequently he was assigned to the 66th Division after the division returned from Fort Benning, Georgia. Once he was assigned to the 66th Dad received more training in artillery and was eventually assigned to fire control.

Just prior to leaving Camp Rucker, Dad wrote my mother:

“I hesitated writing this letter, but there are some things I wanted to tell you. I've never been able to adequately express how I feel about you and I can't find the words now. I love you deeply, honey, and our life together has been very happy. I live and enjoy life when with you and Stevie. This army life I can endure so long as I remember how happy we were together and how happy we'll be when it's over. Don't grieve, honey, if

something happens and I don't come back, and please try not to be bitter.” (November 19, 1944)

In late November, 1944, Dad shipped out via troop train again for Camp Shanks, New Jersey.

Camp Shanks near Orangeburg in Rockland County, New Jersey was named after Major General David C. Shanks (1861-1940), who had been commanding general of the New York Port of Embarkation during WWI. The camp was constructed from September, 1942 thru May, 1943 and was the last point of embarkation for soldiers departing for the European and North African Theatres. Camp Shanks was large, 2040 acres, and could house up to 50,000 soldiers at one time. During WWII almost 1,300,000 military personnel were processed there.

Dad arrived at Camp Shanks the day after Thanksgiving on November 25, 1944 just in time to enjoy a Thanksgiving meal. Again he wrote my mother:

“When we arrived in camp, we had the traditional turkey with all the fixings, dressing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, celery, peas, ice cream, pumpkin pie, peaches, and coffee. In addition we were given a package of Camels and a sack of nuts, oranges, apples and candy. It was the best meal the army has furnished, but, of course, it lacked the family touch.” (November 25, 1944)

While at Shanks Dad had time to visit Times Square in New York City but his time at Camp Shanks was brief, only five days, and he subsequently left by rail and ferry for his embarkation point in New York City late on the evening of November 30, 1944.

On December 1, 1944, my father left New York Harbor at 0830 hours on the *HMV Britannic* of the White Star Line and crossed the Atlantic. He wrote of this experience:

“After my shower I went on the forward deck. The sky was clear, and though the stars were out, it was very dark. The breeze was strong and I frequently caught some salt spray. Looking over the side one could see phosphorous streaks in the waves. It was quiet and beautiful out there, but the ship was headed the wrong way.” (December, 1944)

Dad landed at Southampton, England at 1300 hours on December 12, 1944. The voyage itself was extremely boring. Fortunately my father took a number of books with him to occupy his time. There was only one rough day at sea, but he did not get seasick. They left Southampton by train at 0300 hours on the next day and arrived at Camp Blandford two hours later. His unit then marched to the Down House Camp.

Camp Blandford is in County Dorset in southern England and has a history as a military installation dating back to the eighteenth century. It was reactivated for use by British reservists in 1939 and was a stopping-off point for servicemen from the United States before they were shipped to France. Later on it was used as a hospital complex for wounded US soldiers. Currently it is the headquarters of the Royal Signals, a specialized unit of the British Army, involved in communications and information systems.

During his time in England Dad was fortunate in having a pass to London where he spent a few days sightseeing. He also explored the countryside around Camp Blandford and even attended a church service in a nearby village. After visiting London Dad wrote my mother of his experience.

“One could see in places where houses have been gutted by fire leaving only the walls standing.” (December 20, 1944)

Dad’s unit left Camp Blandford on December 24, 1944 at 0015 hours in a truck convoy and arrived at Portland, England, which is 40 miles distant and on the coast of the English Channel, at 0430 hours. Subsequently his unit was scheduled to cross the English Channel and head for the port of Cherbourg, France.

THE SS LEOPOLDVILLE

The SS *Leopoldville* was a 11,509 ton passenger liner built for the Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo. She was the fifth ship to bear the name *Leopoldville* and initially served on the route between Belgium and its colony, the Belgian Congo. In 1939 the *Leopoldville* was chartered by the British Admiralty. After converting the cargo hold to carry troops and removing the lush appointments on upper decks, the ship completed 24 English-Channel crossings and transported more than 120,000 troops. Defensive guns had been added and these were manned by 24 British sailors. The Belgian crew included 93 Belgian Congo Africans who received orders in Flemish. Her Captain, Charles Limbor, spoke no English.

DISASTER STRIKES

On Christmas Eve, 1944 infantrymen from the 262nd and 264th Regiments of the 66th Division were hastily loaded on two troop ships, the SS *Leopoldville* and the SS *Cheshire*. The artillery pieces, supporting vehicles, and artillerymen were loaded on LSTs (Landing Ship Tank transport carriers). Although the troops were unaware of it at the time, they were headed for the Battle of the Bulge which had been underway since December 16th. The two troopships had four escorts while crossing the English Channel towards Cherbourg: the destroyers *HMS Brilliant* and *HMS Anthony*, the frigate *HMS Hotham*, and the French frigate, *Croix de Lorraine*. Men on board the *Leopoldville* was never given a lifeboat drill nor instructed in the use of their lifejackets.

At about 1800 hours when the *Leopoldville* was about five miles from the coast near Cherbourg she was struck near the aft on the starboard side by a torpedo launched from the German submarine U-486. The explosion killed about 300 men in below-deck compartments, E4, F4, and G4, which flooded. Over the next three hours the *Leopoldville* slowly sank. After about an hour the *HMS Brilliant* came alongside and about 500 soldiers jumped to its deck. High seas made the transfer difficult and an unknown number of men fell between the two ships and were either crushed to death or drowned. Prior to the dramatic rescue by the *Brilliant*, the Flemish and Congolese crew abandoned ship leaving their passengers to fend for themselves.

During the *Brilliant's* rescue of men from the *Leopoldville* the other escorts continued their search for the German sub, but found nothing. A few of the LSTs in the convoy were also able to aid in the rescue. According to one survivor on an LST, his ship used the headlights of transport trucks to shine down on the rescue scene.

Radio communications between the ships and harbor in Cherbourg were poor because the British and the Americans used different radio frequencies. To make matters worse, it was Christmas Eve with minimal staffing on shore due to attendance at holiday parties. Rescue boats that might have come to the aid of the *Leopoldville* were minimally staffed. Radio messages to the British Admiralty in London were never relayed to Cherbourg. The *Leopoldville* sank at about 2100 hours. A belated arrival of the *USS PC-1225* rescued some survivors but many more men were pulled dead from the freezing waters of the English Channel.

In summary, of the 2,235 American servicemen on board the *Leopoldville*, approximately 762 either went down with the ship or died of injuries, drowning, or hypothermia. Captain Limbor and a few crewmen went down with the ship as well as a number of British soldiers. All totaled, 802 men died in this disaster.

Soldiers of the 66th were told not to tell anyone after the war about this catastrophe or their GI benefits would be revoked. My father never mentioned this as he talked freely about it to his family after the war.

Because of the tremendous loss of men, the 66th Division relieved the 94th Division, which had been guarding the Germans in the St. Nazaire and L'Orient pockets which contained German submarine bases. The 94th Division was then sent to fight in the famous Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Mountains in Belgium. Luckily my father happened to be traveling on an LST containing halftracks, trucks, and jeeps rather than on the *Leopoldville*.

The sinking of the *SS Leopoldville* was a well-kept secret. It was almost three weeks before the US media mentioned what had happened to a ship crossing the channel and that information had been obtained from a German source. It was a full month before the American media reported a sizable troop loss. It was nearly 50 years before the full story was told. Since then Allen Andrade has written three books containing stories of men who survived the disaster and Ray Roberts has authored two.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE SINKING OF THE SS LEOPOLDVILLE WRITTEN BY MY FAMILY

Harold Coons' Diary, 12/25/45

Arrived offshore near Cherbourg, France at 2230 on the 24th. Debarked at 1300....
Torpedo attack Xmas Eve sunk troop transport with infantry.

Harold Coons' V-Mail #19 Undated, France

Dearest Margie,

This Christmas will be one to tell Stevie and the others about in years to come. I hope I will be able to have him on my knees and tell him about it next Christmas Eve. And every time retold it will likely be a better story, the reason being that such tales grow better with the years. Then by the time I tell it to my grandchildren, it'll be some tall tale. It'll grow like a fishing tale.

Portion of a letter from Margaret Coons to Clara Coons, Monday night, February 19, 1945

Dear Clara,

One of the boys from Columbus called Mother and told her that her son in the 66th had written that they were in a serious accident Xmas Eve in which some of the boys didn't come out of it. Mother said it sounded like a shipwreck and she knew they must have been moving then. It just confirmed what I'd already suspected as I thought Coonie made a lot more to do than normal over Christmas Eve and saying that if he had been able to write his letters would have been wet, etc. I had seen about Jan. 25th an article in the paper telling about a troopship being sunk in "European waters" by a submarine the latter part of December. I thought that might have been when he crossed, so on Jan. 28th I sent him that clipping and told him I thought that applied to him and wanted him to refer back about it. I haven't gotten a letter and answer yet, but since Mother wrote about this after I know he was in it. And, oh my, I certainly did have cold chills when I knew for sure to think he was safe and what a close call we had that time. The article in the paper said that there were 2200 men on the ship and that 1400 were saved and the others were dead or missing! You should have heard little old Stevie saying, Oh, I'm so glad my Daddy was saved." It's funny, but I haven't worried about his being lost that way. It was always if he got to the front. I certainly hope we don't have to wait till he gets home to hear all the details...

Harold Coons' Letter #146, 5/20/45, France

It was windy and rough, so much so that the LST was tilted at crazy angles and almost everyone was sea sick. I was almost but managed to prevent it by staying on deck in one of the trucks secured to the deck. In the evening we went below to try and sleep and we were suddenly awakened and ordered on deck. I supposed it was just a drill and took my time and had to because of the ladder we had to climb. Upon getting on deck I found all guns were manned and a sailor told me we were under attack. I saw nothing, although a sailor claimed that two fish [torpedoes] had just missed us. The crew had been in on D-Day and said that this was lots more than they ran into then. It was a clear moonlight night, and though cold, I spent the rest of the night sleeping off and on in the truck. It would have been a death trap below. They did get a troop ship carrying part of our infantry and lost lots of men. The clipping you saw referred to that. We heard rumors about it Xmas day while still aboard, but didn't learn much about it until later.

Apparently we were headed for the Bulge, but due to the loss of so many men we headed for L'Orient and St. Nazaire sectors. We landed at Cherbourg and traveled south thru Rennes by way of Coutances and Avranches to Châteaubriant where we spent several cold and miserable days camped out on a huge airport. There was a little snow on the ground. Then we headed over to watch the L'Orient sector and camped in orchards. It was still cold and the ground covered with snow for a few days until we could move in and replace the outfit we were relieving. That outfit headed for Germany in our place and took a beating.

AFTERMATH

The 66th regrouped and headed for the L'Orient and St. Nazaire sectors in Brittany to relieve the 94th Division. Estimates of the number of German forces left behind in the submarine base pockets ranged from 50,000 to 100,000. While in Brittany the 66th carried out daily reconnaissance patrols along the 112-mile front and conducted periodic artillery fire on the bases. The artillery fire disabled a number of big German guns and sank numerous re-supply boats. Upon the German surrender on May 8, 1945, the 66th then moved to the area near Koblenz, Germany for occupation duty and to guard German POW camps.

In late May, 1945 the 66th moved again, this time to the Marseille area on the southern coast of France to staff the staging areas in Marseille, Arles, and St. Victoret from which troops were being sent to the war in the Pacific. Once situated near Marseille, the 263rd staffed the St. Victoret staging area and the 262nd and 264th staffed the Arles staging area. The 870th was assigned as MPs, the 871st guarded the Miramas Depot, and the 872nd was stationed in Marseille. The 721st became a transportation unit. The 266th Engineer and 366th Medical battalions performed their usual duties. While in the Marseille area the 66th Division constructed a total of eight outdoor motion picture amphitheaters where the GIs were treated to numerous USO shows. Many 66th Division athletic teams played one another on newly constructed athletic fields.

With the cessation of hostilities in the Pacific part of the 66th sailed for home in late October, 1945. The remainder of the men in the 66th who did not have enough points to return home was either sent to Delta Base in southern France or to Germany and Austria to serve as occupation forces.

Overall the 66th Division suffered the following casualties: 804 killed, 268 wounded, 7 missing, and 19 captured. Of these there were 1098 battle casualties and 849 non-battle casualties.

Shortly after the *Leopoldville* disaster, the Belgians, Brits, and Americans conducted inquiries. The Belgians completely exonerated themselves of any blame. The British removed the commander of the *Brilliant*, but later gave he and his crew a commendation for their rescue efforts. The Americans found fault with the Belgian captain and crew and the British Navy. However, upon orders by General Eisenhower, these reports were classified and kept secret for 50 years. Speculation about Eisenhower's reasoning for making the reports secret centered around not wanting to embarrass our allies.

As for my father, once near Arles, he served briefly as an MP and then served in the quartermaster's department. When the 66th Division was disbanded, he transferred to Paris and worked in the Criminal Investigation Division until he returned home in March, 1946.

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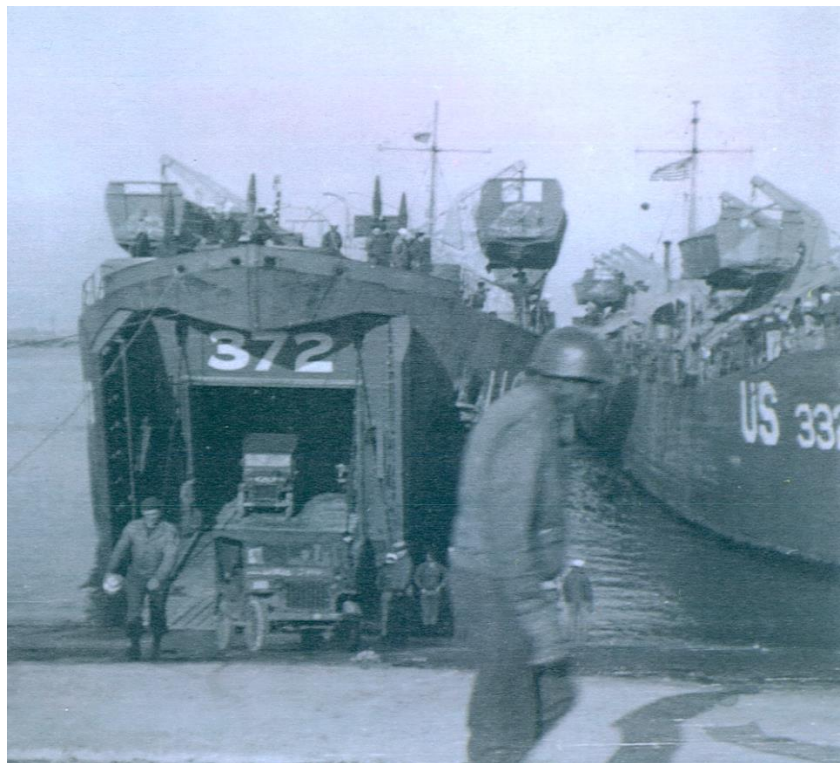
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London WWII Damage (Photo by Harold Coons)



LST (Photo by Lloyd Knackstedt)



Harold Coons Outside Fire Control Hut ((Photo by Harold Coons)



SS Leopoldville