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Howard Beach: Extraordinary Serviceman

In May of 1944, 18 year old Howard Beach set sail to Liverpool, England from Boston, Massachusetts, ready to be put through heavy ground assault and gas chamber training. Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Beach enjoyed baseball, boxing, and wrestling, liked Franklin D. Roosevelt and chose to enlist after deciding it was the masculine thing to do. He had originally attempted to enlist in the Marines at age 17, along with his friend Gordy O'Connor, who was accepted. But Gordy never actually went overseas. Beach did not pass the eyesight exam, and was ultimately turned away by the Marines because wearing glasses was not acceptable back then in the Marines. He later volunteered for the Army and was accepted.

After reporting for Army duty, Beach eventually travelled to several camps (including Camp Wallace and Fort Bliss in Texas, Camp Davis in North Carolina, and Camp Grant in Illinois) to receive military training. While at Fort Meade in Maryland, he filled out his "last will and testament," and was granted an insurance policy of \$10,000 - a hefty sum in the mid-1940's. During his training, he was

found to be well-suited for the position of radio operator, successfully completing a Morse Code exam that only around thirty percent of applicants managed to pass. On the 13th of June in 1943, Beach was officially a part of the Army, after stints of “Kitchen Police (KP)” duty and training all across the country. His time serving would include five different campaigns in France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Germany.

Days before he was “officially” a soldier, Beach was sent ashore at Omaha Beach on Day 3 of the Normandy Landings (also known as D-Day and Operation Neptune). After one week there, he was assigned to the 9th Infantry Division & Reconnaissance, (which meant he was typically sent in before regular troops), and was among the first Allied forces to enter Belgium and Germany.

Beach also participated in the Battle of the Bulge, where the U.S. troops experienced their most costly surprise attack from the German forces, receiving much violence, and Operation Plunder, a victory in which Allied forces managed to cross the River Rhine. While at Elbe River, Germany, he met the ruthless Russians soldiers who, stereotypically at times, enjoyed drinking vodka and dancing, and were known to massacre German citizens and soldiers alike, including leading German prisoners out into the forest to be mass executed, then laughing as they returned to their camps.

Though Beach occupied many places in Europe, and was an active troop member, he failed to retain close relationships with any overseas comrades; a great regret of his. Like most soldiers, he was eager to leave behind the memories of battle, but now wishes that he had kept better contact with previous allies. Unlike many soldiers, Beach did not have any sort of pre-combat ritual or tradition.

Through writing many letters to family (though many were censored and shrunk down for lighter load) and sending home money, he was motivated to “keep his sanity”, resisting shell shock, which is now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

For his services during World War II, Beach was entitled to three Purple Hearts and awarded the Silver Star. A Purple Heart is awarded whenever a troop member is injured at the hand of an enemy, and requires medical attention from the Medics. One of Beach’s injuries included a concussion from mortar fire. A Silver Star is awarded for courage in action while in battle against any enemy of the United States; Beach earned his while fighting two companies of the German Schutzstaffel (SS), alongside five dismounted tankers who did not survive. German soldiers were trained to “aim next to the muzzle flash”, so Beach learned to hold his weapon on the opposite side of his body, anticipating that the Axis forces would aim slightly to the right side of the flash. This method allowed him to kill roughly fifty Germans in one day, a feat worthy of a Silver Star medal. He was chosen to be on his high school’s “Wall of Inspiration”, denoting that he had done something admirable for his country, especially in combat.

Beach returned home in the October of 1945, and began working at American Appraisal & Association in Milwaukee, in 1948, the same year he got married. He was later transferred to Southern California, where he retired in 1991. He penned a memoir, “The Private War of Howie Beach”, detailing his experience of World War II. Beach stated he never regretted joining the Army, and always tried to focus on what would come after the war, rather than the high-stress situations he was forced to

endure. While he was not drafted, and chose to enlist, Beach feels that he made the right choice at the right time, and served his country well.