

## **The SS Leopoldville Tragedy and Coverup:**

*US ARMY ST's 474, 539, and 751 tried to help during one of WW2's most tragic Naval Incidents – ST 474 was a DeLand-built Wartug*

*Many small US Army tugs, or harbor tugs, were assigned to the Cherbourg Harbor area after it was finally captured in July of 1944. The Germans had left mines, and possibly continued to send them in, as DeLand's ST 344 hit a mine and exploded on July 20, 1944. I have found evidence that the 335<sup>th</sup>, 338<sup>th</sup>, and 357<sup>th</sup> Harbor Craft companies operated from the area with quite a few Army small tugs involved. But one amazing troop ship sinking in the area on Christmas Eve 1944 has to rank as one of WW2's worst in terms of loss of life, and most horribly, the lack of planning and emergency preparation, poor communications, and some of the downright worst nautical emergency decisions ever made. Almost 800 Americans would die, many in 48 degree water.*

*I'll allow you to decide whether it made any sense to cover this all up, but I certainly don't think so after the war was over. Until then, maybe...but what a way to treat the parents and relatives of the killed! Amazingly enough, I've found a letter that indicates DeLand's ST 474 Warboat, which we knew was assigned to Cherbourg Harbor, was also involved either in the rescue, or the recovery of the dead. But that's all I have from ST 474 at this point. Here are the complete details on the other two ST's as I found them and the horrific story. This is a long one, folks!*

*Dan Friend August 8, 2015*

## **ST 539: Excerpt from “Voices of My Comrades: America's Reserve Officers remember WW2”, edited by Carol Adele Kelly**

*Lieutenant Colonel Arthur R. Hummel was one of four officers and eight crewmen aboard ST 539, part of the 357<sup>th</sup> Harbor Company, when the call came to assist the Leopoldville on Christmas Eve, 1944:*

*.....Lieutenant Colonel Hummel remembers 24 December as “a stormy, windy day” with “ship and barge movements minimized in the harbor.” ST 539, an 85 foot, 600 hp diesel Army tug, was standing by a freighter when at “about 16:30 to 17:00 hours...we received a radio message from the control tower to stand by to possibly go to the relief of a stricken craft,” he writes in a 1955 report of the Leopoldville disaster.*

*“We knew it would be rough in the channel...My guess estimated about a twenty-foot sea...We were subjected to violent pitching, throwing our stern and propeller clear of water and causing the ship to vibrate violently momentarily until the engineer could cut power. Our forward motion was slow and seemingly an eternity before we reached our*

destination.....I would say about an hour and an hour and fifteen minutes were involved...”

“As we approached, we could see the troops lining the rails...I found that I had my hands full just trying to keep clear of the other craft in the area since it seemed that each wave and wind would carry the tug about 300 feet....the liner was sitting pretty well but all of a sudden she started to sink lower.....Not too much time had elapsed since we arrived—I would say not over thirty minutes—and I don’t believe we could gotten close enough to her bow to have secured a towing howser without crashing into her. She did sink rapidly and we could see troops jumping as the water approached her decks....As soon as she went under, we moved into the mass of men...The entire crew began to pull the survivors aboard....”

“We were amazed at the gear these troops had on, overcoats, packs, web equipment, and the like....It required about three of us to pull each man in but some of the survivors, pulled in early, assisted the crew in later work....Some men were so far gone or frozen that they could not help themselves to safety and were lost... We counted the preservers left the next day and although I cannot recall the exact number, I do know we had over sixty jackets,” Lieutenant Colonel Hummel reports.

Summarizing his conclusions about loss of life in the Leopoldville disaster, he cites excessive gear loading down the troops; the Belgian liner’s antiquated life-jackets that were “not of sufficient buoyancy to hold weight”; and the fact, reported by his CO and other officers ashore, that officers and crew of the *Leopoldville* were in Cherbourg Harbor “about the time of our departure from the scene in ST 539.”

- Many other reasons are mentioned in various reports about this disaster which cost the lives of approximately 820 soldiers and crew. Of this total, approximately 300 were killed in the initial torpedo strike from U-486. All details on this tragedy were covered up by the government until 1958. Language barriers, silly communications foul ups, a malfunctioning PA system aboard the *Leopoldville*, only 14 lifeboats for 2,430 crew and soldiers, and a delay in the initial distress call all contributed to the horror story. Two other ships, the *HMS Brilliant*, and *PC-1225* took off quite a number of soldiers but did not have room for them all.

***The captain of ST 539 was later removed from ST 539 and reassigned. Most reviewing the situation today find little that he could have done to prevent this tragic loss of life and hold him blameless.***

## **ST 751:**

I was recently contacted by Lorna Gibbs whose father-in-law

Morris Gibbs, was assigned to ST 751 and for years refused to speak of the incident other to mention he was always depressed around Christmas. She sent me a copy of an original very

unusual letter of commendation, which now makes sense knowing that the Leopoldville incident was covered up! ST 751 was assigned to the Cherbourg harbor when this happened. Here's the letter, which does not mention his ship number, the name of the vessel they were working on, or the date of the incident or any other details...which is most unusual!

**Communications Zone  
European Theater of Operations  
United States Army**

**Release on Receipt  
Number: 60877**

**ARMY TUG BOAT CREW CITED FOR AIDING IN SEA RESCUE OF U.S. TROOPS.**

**WITH U.S. FORCES IN FRANCE:-----The eleven man crew of a U. S. Army tugboat operating in a French port recently was commended by the port harbor boat service commander for aiding in the rescue of U. S. troops at sea.**

**An Army troopship had been sunk off the coast of France, and an emergency call had been sounded to all U. S. Army ports in the vicinity for rescue craft.**

**The commander of the 11th Port organization relayed the emergency call to the (338th Harbor Craft Company ), ordering any craft in the harbor that could possible move proceed to the rescue.**

**The only tugboat available was operating on seven of its eight cylinders, but the crew commander, 1st Lt. David T. Edquist and his men aided materially in the rescue of troopship passengers, taking several of the survivors to port.**

**Lt. Col. Francis P. Leary, harbor boat service commander at the port, commended the crew in a written citation to each man lauding their prompt response to the emergency call and their expert handling of the tugboat during the rescue work.**

**Captain John. W. Dalton, former coach and teacher at Columbia High School, Cincinnati, Ohio, is the unit commander.**

**Men of the crew are:**

**Connecticut, Middletown: Cpl. Arthur V. McDowell, 133 S. Mail St.  
Kentucky, Louisville: Cpl. Raymond Rock, 1632 Beech St.  
Minnesota, Le Sueur: Warrant Officer (jg) James C. Hayden, Route 3  
New York, Bronx: Cpl. Rogelio Rodriguez, 850 E. 161st St.  
New York, Brooklyn: Pfc. Robert D. Kipp, 16 Webster Court  
North Dakota, Willow City: Cpl. Morris R. Gibbs  
Ohio, Cleveland Hgts: Cpl. James E. Horn, 2806 Coleridge Road  
Pennsylvania, Hooversville: Pvt. Angelo Anzelone  
Tennessee, Knoxville: T/Sgt. Paul H. Ketner, 3503 McCalla Ave.  
Washington, Seattle: Warrant Officer (jg) Alfred A. Jensen. 3773 S. 158th. St.**

**END.**

In summary, at least 3, and possibly even more, small US Army tugs were involved in rescue or recovery at the Leopoldville incident. But since it was Christmas Eve, most crews were not at their boats until later when word spread of the tragedy.

## ***MORE VERSIONS OF THE STORY AND DETAILS:***

Prior to the attack, the *Léopoldville* had made 24 cross-Channel crossings, transporting more than 120,000 troops. She sailed as part of convoy WEP-3, a cross-channel convoy from Southampton to Cherbourg. The *Léopoldville* was in a diamond formation with four escorts; the destroyers [HMS Brilliant](#) and [HMS Anthony](#), the frigate [HMS Hotham](#), and the French frigate [Croix de Lorraine](#), and another troopship the SS *Cheshire*.<sup>[6]</sup>

On the day of the attack, the *Léopoldville* was carrying reinforcements from the 262nd and 264th Regiments, [66th Infantry Division](#) of the [United States Army](#) towards the [Battle of the Bulge](#).

While in the [English Channel](#) on 24 December 1944, approximately five miles from the coast of Cherbourg, the convoy was attacked by [U-486](#) and at 17.54 hours the *Léopoldville* was hit by one of two torpedoes fired from the U-boat. She finally sank by the stern at 20.40 hours.

Of the 2,235 American servicemen on board, approximately 515 are presumed to have gone down with the ship. Another 248 died from injuries, drowning, or hypothermia. Captain [Charles Limbor](#), one Belgian and three Congolese crewmembers also went down with the ship. An unknown number of British soldiers died. Documents about the attack remained classified until 1996.

One of the escort destroyers, [HMS Brilliant](#), came alongside the stricken vessel. Soldiers on the *Léopoldville* jumped down onto the smaller *Brilliant*. The destroyer could take only a few hundred of the men and headed for the shore. No further rescue attempt was made, and some 1,200 men were left aboard.<sup>[7]</sup> [USS PC-1225](#) also rescued survivors.<sup>[8]</sup> The *Léopoldville* stayed afloat for two and a half hours after the torpedo hit before finally sinking, stern first.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1997, the 66th Infantry Division Monument was dedicated in Ft. Benning, Georgia in memory of the soldiers who died aboard the *Léopoldville* and also to those who survived the attack on the *Léopoldville* but were later killed in action.

In 2005, a memorial was erected in Veterans Memorial Park in [Titusville, Florida](#).

In 1998 the [History Channel](#) broadcast the documentary film "Cover Up: The Sinking of the SS Léopoldville" which included interviews with numerous survivors of the sinking of the ship from the 66th Infantry Division and sailors from the US Navy who attempted to save them by pulling them out of the water. The sailors claimed that they arrived after the sinking of the ship and that most of the men who they pulled out of the water had already frozen to death in the water by the time they arrived on the scene.

The soldiers of the 66th Infantry Division were ordered not to tell anyone about the sinking of the ship and their letters home were censored by the Army during the rest of World War II. After the war, the soldiers were also ordered at discharge not to talk about the sinking of the SS *Léopoldville* to the press and told that their GI benefits as civilians would be canceled if they did so.

In 2009, the [National Geographic Channel](#) aired a special that recreated the events that led to the sinking and had divers investigating the wreck.<sup>[9]</sup>

Jack Dixon was a young seaman on board HMS *Brilliant*, the first destroyer to rescue American troops abandoning the ship on that Christmas Eve, 1944. At just 21 years old, he and others crew members battled against the conditions to try and rescue as many of the soldiers as possible.

From his web site;

"*H.M.S. Brilliant* went along the port side of the troopship we had put our starboard fenders over the side; the sea swell was causing a rise and fall of between 8ft and 12ft. The scrambling nets were hanging down the *Léopoldville*'s port side and the American soldiers were coming down on to our upper deck. Some men had started to jump down from a height of approximately 40 feet. Unfortunately limbs were being broken when they landed on the torpedo tubes and other fixed equipment on the starboard side of the upperdeck; some men fell between the two vessels and

were crushed as the two vessels crashed into each other. To avoid any further injuries, if possible, all our hammocks were brought up from our mess-decks below and laid on the starboard upper deck to cushion the fall of the soldiers as they landed. "

There is a memorial in Weymouth UK engraved with: "24 DECEMBER 1944 ENGLISH CHANNEL 802 DIED WHEN THE TROOPSHIP SS 'LEOPOLDVILLE' WAS SUNK BY A TORPEDO OFF CHERBOURG"

### **Aftermath**

The torpedo struck the Leopoldville on the starboard side aft and exploded in number four hold. Compartments E-4, F-4 and G-4 were flooded and the wooden stairways were blown away. These compartments were occupied by F and H Companies and the weapons platoon of E Company of the 262nd Regiment. F and H companies were almost completely decimated and the weapons platoon of E Company lost two thirds of its soldiers. Very few soldiers were able to escape from these compartments. Many were killed by the blast. Others drowned. There was a tremendous effort by the soldiers who made it to the top deck to rescue those below, risking their lives to do so.

The soldiers on the deck of the Leopoldville remained orderly. This was already a fiasco, but it would become much worse because of multiple unacceptable events. First of all, the loudspeaker did not work well and messages were in French. They were told that a tugboat was underway to tow them in; that soldiers would be transferred to other boats; and that the ship is not sinking. None of this was true!

Captain Charles Limbor (Belgian) ordered his crew to abandon ship. When the crew was lowering the lifeboats, the soldiers began clapping. They thought the boats were for them but the crew got in the boats and left. The soldiers, used to receiving and carrying out orders had no one helping them except for a few junior officers who had received no information.

### **Failed communications**

One of the most unforgivable aspects of this troop movement was the total failure of communications. First, there was a complete failure of communications on the ship with the soldiers on board. Second, the Brilliant had to signal Portsmouth rather than Cherbourg. Third, U. S. forces in France were tuned to a different frequency than used by the British and could not read British code. Fourth, Portsmouth's subsequent call to Cherbourg was delayed for nearly an hour for reasons that have not been explained.

Other causes include the failure of any ship of the convoy to reply to blinker signals from shore. The Americans at Fort L'Quest in Cherbourg noticed immediately the convoy had

stopped and soon observed one vessel was drifting toward a minefield. Repeated attempts by Fort L'Quest to signal the Leopoldville and convoy with blinkers failed until 1825 hours when the Brilliant signaled: "Leopoldville hit, need assistance." Fort L'Quest blinked back inquiring what kind of assistance was needed, but received no reply. Further cause of delay was Christmas itself. Cherbourg harbor had several hundred vessels, which could have served as rescue crafts but were lightly manned with cold engines. All posts were minimally staffed due to Christmas parties. A large flotilla of these small crafts could have saved many of the soldiers, as happened at Dunkirk in 1940, when a massive flotilla of small boats from England crossed the English Channel and rescued hundreds of British and French soldiers. This should have happened here as Cherbourg knew the convoy was coming and should have been prepared for such a U-boat strike.

The Brilliant approaches At 1825 hours Captain Pringle made the decision to attempt a risky rescue of soldiers on the decks of the Leopoldville as it was obvious the ship was slowly sinking. With much skill he brought the Brilliant to the port side of the Leopoldville. His crew began calling to the soldiers, "Jump mates! Save yourselves!" The two ships were rising and falling alternately and banging against each other. The jump had to be timed just as the Brilliant began coming up and the Leopoldville was going down. Several tried the jump but did not time it right, fell between the two ships and were crushed to death. Several young officers quickly realized the problem and instructed the soldiers to line up on the rail in small groups and jump when they called out "Jump." Some of the soldiers, having witnessed the death of those who were crushed when the two ships banged together, backed off and would not jump.

Each time a group jumped another group of nine or ten would line up and be ready for the next jump. Unfortunately, there continued to be missed jumps but were much in the minority and many soldiers were saved. When 500 soldiers were safe on the Brilliant, Captain Pringle knew he could take no more, so he finally, reluctantly, had to back off and head to Cherbourg harbor, which was only three and a half miles away. His ship had taken quite a beating. On the way in, he began passing small rescue craft coming out from Cherbourg. The other ships of the convoy were dispersed trying to find the submarine.

There was no one left with seamanship experience, and the soldiers were left without help. Captain Limbor walked around the ship telling the soldiers to abandon ship. Since he gave the orders in French, the soldiers did not understand. They had no tools with which to free the lifeboats and the rafts. There were enough rafts to take care of all of them and keep them afloat out of the cold water until help came. They just did not deserve this fate. Many would die.

Two explosions occurred in the ship between 2020 and 2040 hours, and she began to sink stern down. Some soldiers were thrown into the water and others merely stepped off the deck into the water. Rafts and equipment broke loose and were swept into the water.

In the water hundreds of men were in 48-degree water. No one had given them any instructions about removing heavy clothing and headgear, boots, backpacks, ammunition belts and trench tools. Overcoats should have been removed before entering the water. Helmets with chin straps should have been removed before jumping into the water to prevent broken necks. In some cases the life jackets were not correctly fastened to the body.

Approximately 1,200 men were thrown, jumped or merely stepped into the water. The initial panic quieted as the crowd dispersed into smaller groups. Many men quickly drowned or succumbed to hypothermia. Some of the stronger and more determined ones who found a piece of debris or a raft to cling to managed to survive until help arrived. Some of those who survived reported the difficulties they encountered when other soldiers held on to them, desperately trying to keep their heads above water and the difficulty of disengaging from them in their own desperate effort to survive.

It was now approximately two and a half hours since the torpedo hit the Leopoldville, and due to the delay in communications and less people on duty in Cherbourg because of Christmas, rescue boats were just beginning to reach the scene. The men on the boats pulled many soldiers out of the water who had died by drowning or by hypothermia. Some were so weak they were hard to pull into the boats as they were dead weight without the strength to help. The darkness compounded the difficulty of rescue. The dead were taken back to Cherbourg and stacked on the dock awaiting burial in American military cemeteries on the outskirts of Cherbourg. Many associated with this tragedy felt the incident was buried with them.

Survivors were instructed not to write home about the sinking and wartime censorship was generally effective in enforcing the order. Investigative files were sealed. Relatives were given incomplete information. Death notices after heavy losses were spread out over months, some listed as missing in action and later presumed killed in action. This was considered a morale factor. An official British memo in 1946 stated: "The story of the Leopoldville does not reflect any great credit upon us, and I should be adverse to disclosing it unless the need is very strong. To issue anything publicly in America might only serve to revive a controversy that would be better allowed to die." The bodies of approximately 493 soldiers were never found.

## **Survivors**

Many of the survivors who had made the jump to the Brilliant had cuts, bad bruises and fractured bones requiring hospitalization. The incidence of hypothermia, pneumonia and frostbite was high in those who were in the water, and the majority were hospitalized. Those who had no significant injuries or illnesses were placed in a small tent city and served meals in one of the mess halls in Cherbourg. The members of a black port battalion gave up their Christmas meal to the survivors and sang Christmas carols to them while they were seated for the meal. Having looked forward to this meal for many days, this was quite a sacrifice. God bless them! Some survivors were able to rejoice the



Division in about a week. The soldiers who were on the SS Cheshire were put on trains the next morning (Christmas Day) and taken to Rennes where they pitched their tents on Saint Jacques Airport, formerly used by the Germans. The 66th Division relieved the 94th Infantry Division on New Year's Eve, 1944, to contain the Germans in the two U-boat bases at Lorient and St. Nazaire.

During this entire tragedy, where so many soldiers were lost who should not have been lost, there were many heroes who risked their lives to save a fellow soldier. One that comes to mind was William Thompson, a Clemson graduate and a good friend of mine from Marion, S. C. He was credited with saving numerous soldiers by leaving the raft he was holding onto and swimming out to a nearby soldier to bring him to the raft, although, he himself was very exhausted. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for valor. His son, Bill Thompson, and daughter, Jane Jilich, live in Charleston.

Ben Thraikill, who helped the G.I.s make the jump, became a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives, representing Greenville, S.C. He was instrumental in getting Resolution H-9517 passed April 19, 2000, by the House and concurred on by the South Carolina Senate in honor of the 15 South Carolina soldiers who lost their lives on the Leopoldville.

### **Stories by survivors**

A few personal communications describe the difficulties some of the soldiers had in desperately trying to save their lives and those of others.

Ebner Nicholson, Jr., Tucson , Ariz.: "Our captain saved our lives from getting on the Leopoldville. They were going to load us on, but the captain said we were not to be loaded until his men had coffee and doughnuts (Red Cross). They loaded F Company instead, and F Company lost most of its men."

"Bill" Everhard from Phoenix, Ariz.: "I was a 21-year-old second lieutenant of Company B, 264th Regiment of the 66th Infantry Division. I was assigned to a cabin, which I shared with three fellow officers. It was below the water line. I was in the cabin and had stripped and was trying to get some sleep when an explosion threw me out of my bunk. An alarm bell began ringing and the three cabin mates were scurrying to put on their clothes. Two left and headed topside. As I was leaving, there was a rumbling roar coming from within the ship. The floor pitched and I was thrown to the deck of the passageway. The cabin door shut behind me with the remaining occupant inside. Water began covering the deck and rose quickly. The cabin mate was inside and hollering and both of us were trying to pull the door open. It was jammed and all of the pushing and pounding were to no avail. The water rose to my armpits and the lights went out. I could do no more and pulled myself along the ceiling toward the staircase. When I finally reached the stairs I was so numb I could hardly climb them. I continued to climb until I reached the deck. I never saw my friend again."

Walter Blunt of Company L, 262nd Regiment: “I was awakened by the explosion and was immediately engulfed by water as the compartment filled and there was total darkness. As the water buoyed me up, I felt equipment and objects bumping against me. I heard screams and muffled cries. My head surfaced above the water and I could taste the oil and smelled the gunpowder. I was dazed but aware enough to wonder if I would die. My next awareness found my head in a hole. My head and part of my shoulders were above the floor but I could not move. I could see the ocean. There were waves washing over me and then there would be a pause. I held my breath when the waves washed over me, but each time the wave stayed longer. I thought it was a hell of a way to die. The next thing I knew, there was a light shining down on me and the voice I recognized was Captain H. C. Orr, my company commander. He said, ‘Give me your hand son, you’ll be all right.’ After a few minutes of pulling and struggling, I was lifted from the hole.” Blunt survived. Seventy-four of the 181 men in Blunt’s company were lost and 61 were injured.

Speaking of holes, “Mac” MacFall, a runner for E Company, 262nd Regiment, found himself in the ocean, outside of the ship. Some soldiers saw him and threw a rope to him and pulled him in. He was evidently backwashed out of the compartment where the torpedo struck.

Peter Wood of Bethesda, Md., referred to the crew putting the lifeboats in and leaving. He related the soldiers actually cheered as they thought the boats were for them, but, of course, they were sadly mistaken. The cheering stopped when the crew got in the boats and pulled away. A silence fell over the crowd of soldiers on the deck. Wood added that a very special event happened. A soldier began singing “The Star Spangled Banner” and others joined in until hundreds of soldiers followed, some not knowing the words and some not knowing how to sing, but all were trying. This occurred at a time when the lifeboats and rafts were snarled and the crew was abandoning the ship. Wood still chokes when he remembers.

A very unusual account of survival was given by Kenneth Cline of Hatfield, Pennsylvania: “When the torpedo struck, I was lying in my hammock on the bottom deck of the hold. I was covered with water instantly. My foot was trapped and something struck me on my head and shoulder. Fortunately, I was able to get free from whatever was containing me and swam to the surface after being submerged for a long time. I saw a metal ladder on the side of the hold. I proceeded to the upper deck. Several men on deck gave me a blanket. I was taken to the crewman’s cabin. Two medics came into my cabin and decided to give me a shot of morphine. I was extremely cold. Sometime later I remember four men carrying me in a blanket down a stairway. On the deck I had my second close call. The four men swung me, unconscious, at the time, with very good timing on to the deck of the Brilliant. At Cherbourg they found my shoulder fractured and some bones in my foot were fractured. I had a very short stay in Europe, back to the states in two months. In hospital five and a half months, then back to duty.”

Lieutenant Ben Thraikill from Greenville, S.C., and an officer in K Company, 264th Regiment, was one of the officers who organized the jump to the Brilliant. These officers

stayed there until water began crossing the deck. They swam away as fast as they could to avoid the suction and fortunately were picked up by a boat. He was highly critical of the ship. He said the conversion of the ship from a passenger ship to a troopship made mass rescue almost impossible since the flimsy walls were weak and a solid blast would seal off any recovery. He was very angry. He mentioned there were many heroic efforts by soldiers to rescue those in distress and in taking care of the wounded.

From a soldier who requests anonymity: "A friend of mine and I were in our hammocks, but because of the conditions in the boat, we decided to go up to the deck. Shortly thereafter, we climbed the flimsy stairway to the deck; a tremendous explosion shook the boat. A black volcanic eruption arose from the compartment I had just left. After sunset, we were in complete darkness. The ship began to list. After some time the boat shuddered and there was a muffled sound, which I assume was a ruptured bulkhead. A British boat came alongside, but the sea was rough and the vessels could not be locked together. We were told to jump, and two soldiers did jump. A cruel wave sequence occurred and they fell into the water. I made the jump OK, but I still see them. Later we were asked to try and identify any of the dead. I could not and this is another thing I still see." (This story was given to me in the year 2000 and this soldier is still haunted by the memories of this tragedy. He is 89 years old).

The following was recorded by a member of the Brilliant's crew, William E. Clark, able seaman, torpedo man, 23 years old: "My recollection of that terrible night, Christmas Eve, 1944, is still as clear as the actual happening. I was on watch at the time, being a torpedo rating. Our other activities were to man the depth charges. We heard the report that the Leopoldville had been hit. The seas were rough. Our captain, John Pringle, brought the Brilliant alongside, which was no easy task, as we were rising up and down, giving only short periods for the troops to climb or jump on board. We tried to break the fall as they jumped by laying our hammocks on the deck, but quite a few damaged limbs when they landed. The most horrifying was watching some of the guys sliding down ropes to our lower deck only to be killed when both boats came together. I will always remember screams of those poor G .I.s who never had a chance of survival."

There were hundreds of heroes who risked their lives to save someone they did not know. One of the most outstanding was Colonel Ira Blumberg, who made eight or 10 trips down a 40-foot ladder and each time he brought two soldiers, one hanging to his neck and the other hanging to his waist. Unfortunately, he did not survive his last trip. He was highly decorated posthumously.

A story told by a soldier to the author - one that particularly touched the author's heart - was the soldier's encounter with a very young soldier who was crying. He asked him what was the matter and the young G. I. said he knew he would die because he could not swim. The soldier took off his own life jacket, put it on the young soldier and said, "You are going to be all right." In the situation they were in, giving your life jacket to someone else is the ultimate sacrifice. We know the older soldier survived and can only hope the younger one did also.

## **Epilogue**

Although badly damaged, the 66th Infantry Division relieved the 94th Infantry Division on schedule New Year's Eve, 1944, and contained 50,000 Germans in the U-boat bases of St. Nazaire and Lorient until the end of the war. The soldiers of the 66th Infantry Division were given blanket Bronze Star medals for their meritorious service in combat.

Clive Cussler and his crew located the Leopoldville in 150 feet of water near the French coast in July 1984. Cussler said it should be designated a wartime memorial. It is a tomb for hundreds of soldiers just like Arlington. The French government protects it well.

*Randolph Bradham, M. D., is a former staff sergeant in E Co., 262nd Reg., 66 Inf. Div. and a retired surgeon.*

## **ST 474 DETAILS**

We have quite a few photos and letters courtesy Vivian Hallett, daughter of Master Sergeant Ray C. Bishop, who was the master of DeLand's ST 474 while working in the Cherbourg harbor. A dvd exists with Ray's wife Thelma detailing that two ST's were sunk while Bishop was there, and one of those boats was probably DeLand's ST 344 which exploded on July 20, 1944, at the outer harbor (Grande Rade) of Cherbourg harbor probably due to a mine, possibly one of the new pressure sensitive type. They returned some of the US dead to shore.

No one is certain about the other lost ST as no other one is listed as missing at Cherbourg Harbor. ST 474 is also mentioned as helping in a December troop ship incident, almost certainly this was the Leopoldville on Christmas Eve, 1944. Probably in the recovery and possibly in the rescue.

ST's mentioned on notes on the photo reverse, or clearly discernable in the photos: ST 474, 15, 340, 489, 689, & 743 One ST whose number is unknown is named the John T. Walker...it was at Antwerp after the war. These boats were at Cherbourg during the war OR at Antwerp at war's end....or both!

ST's where the numbers are too hard to be 100% certain: 749, 71\_, 780?

One very interesting fact was that ST 474 had 3 German crewman: prisoners worked on the boats which I did not know! We now have the photo

Only one photo, that of a monument, is from Omaha Beach. ST 474 may have served there after D-Day+1; a reference to a visit there with a foul odor indicates they might have been there right after D-Day....which would make ST 474 a Normandy Warboat!  
DF