

DRAWING D-DAY

An Artist's
Journey
Through War



BY UGO GIANNINI WITH MAXINE GIANNINI

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UGO GIANNINI
With Maxine Giannini

We had been quartered in our boat for the past two days—it was night. Tomorrow would be the sixth of June—1944. The day had been dismal, gray, the usual small talk among the men. Twenty-two months in England! And now we were leaving. Why did the Regimental Commander say to us before we boarded ship, "I expect most of you back in twenty-four hours"? He had hemmed and hawed but that was all he really said. None of us believed him. I was a member of a team of forty special combat troops selected from the 29th Division, Military Police Platoon—and part of the 116th Regiment scheduled to assault Omaha Beach, a crescent-shaped silvery strand in front of the seaside villages of Vierville and Colleville—Sur Mer. The attack would consist of five assault waves; then the main body of troops would begin landing—I would be in the first assault wave. How ironic though: only a few months ago, I had been transferred from a B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) linesman in Company G to the 29th Division M.P. (Military Police) Platoon. This had been a welcome change—despite the continued rigorous training, my new duties had provided me with a new set of experiences, and I assumed options other than a first-wave assault on Hitler's Fortress Europe. Much later I realized that irony was only one face of destiny, and that fate was not subject to human continuance.

Sometime during the night—we began to move, slowly at first. Soon the ship fell to rolling. The men were resting, or sleeping or roving around on deck. We had ships on either side, and I saw several in a line behind me—black, flat silhouettes with very small blue lights. One small boat in front of us seemed to leave a long phosphorescent glow in its wake. The ship had more movement now—we must have left Portsmouth Bay more than an hour ago. I felt vaguely sick, restless, and tired—it was close in the cabin, dimly lit with blue lights. Somewhere the diesel engine droned on. Lying back in my bunk—I gazed at the silver dollar resting on my chest—my combat boots—the musette—all in order—I wondered about these objects, the rifle, the bandoleer of ammunition, the grenades—soon I would put them on. Sometime later the order was given; there was a great deal of activity—one by one, heavily burdened

PREFACE

By Maxine Giannini

The fortieth anniversary of the D-Day landings was June 6, 1984. "Red" Holland and Verne Johnson, who had been Ugo's commanding officers, had contacted him beforehand, wanting to reunite and return to the beach for the ceremonies. There seemed to be a special affection for Ugo in the MP Platoon. Upon hearing of his death in 1993, Rex Potts, his sergeant, said, "How I loved that man."

The last time Ugo had been on the beach was in 1948, four years after the invasion. He and Arnold Herstand returned to Paris under the GI Bill (this was a stipend given to ex-GIs by the government to complete their schooling; it educated a generation who would have not had the opportunity) and persuaded painter Fernand Léger to open an atelier for the GIs, where Ugo studied. Ugo was still wearing his GI boots and khaki trousers. He met a man named Tom Van Dyke, who was a documentary filmmaker. They returned to Omaha Beach and made a film about the invasion. Although it was made for the fifth anniversary, the film was never released. No one knows where it is today.

In 1984, Ugo could not return, whatever the reasons—emotional, physical, psychological. But it was then that his longest journey back to Omaha and the events of WWII began. After he was asked to give a lecture for an organization of businessmen, Ugo began to reread *Overlord* by Max Hastings and *The Longest Day* by Cornelius Ryan, inspiring what was to become an overwhelming preoccupation with WWII that culminated in his last monumental paintings. Ugo wrote this that year.

men climbed up the narrow steps to the deck. I worried about all the extra weight, the metal disc signs we were to put up as markers—some where along the beaches and roads of Normandy. I was troubled by the sense of reality, which seemed too much prepared—too staged in advance—it seemed absurd that all of this had to be invented. Every thing had become terribly physical, related to each other mysteriously: battleship gray, olive drab—all of one purpose—a mask of dull heavy brown—inane comments and jokes betraying the white vulnerable flesh beneath—There was that subtle odor—the sweat of anxiety. Whatever of dread, of honor, was linked to other events, other times, other men from Troy to the Argonne, was I another victim? An expendable? As day broke the sky separated from the sea—it was leaden gray, the sea darker, rougher. The square nose of our boat steadily pounded against the waves blending with the sounds of diesels and slapping winds.

Ahead, just below the horizon, a long gray strip floated between sea and sky. To my left, and to my right, ships of all sizes appearing like phantom silhouettes—a muffled booming, insistent and rhythmic rolled with the winds. At some distance from the closest boats, white spouts mushroomed from the gray water and turned into black drifting funnels. Like random golf balls, shells had dropped from the sky. Surprised, disbelieving—while my hand snapped the chinstrap from its snug position under my chin. (A loose-fitting helmet under artillery fire was a defensive action.) Something was out there! I was in my body's space in a protective cocoon of equipment and a vast armada of ships. The long gray strip grew visible into land, misty, gray, shrouded. More waterspouts with black plumes—closer now—they seemed futile. Ahead the land had contoured; from the slow rise of the pale beach to its heights, it looked exceedingly peaceful, gray, and still. Stretches of earth or sand dotted with clumps of gray grasses—along the bluffs outcroppings of rock—at the water's edge a heavy mist.

Suddenly something was happening to the land. Great clouds of smoke and dust erupted from white flashes all along the bluffs and ridges.

There was now a fury of sound as the naval bombardment began. Large ships five to six miles at sea were pounding the coastal fortifications. Overhead—the sky boomed and thundered—was cracked and ripped by thundering shells—and the steadily growing roar of fighters and bombers—(above Omaha, 324 bombers were dropping their lethal load three miles inland beyond the targets)—the guns of Omaha Beach remained. Only a half mile or so from the coast the German batteries were untouched—waiting.... We were now less than one mile from Omaha Beach—shells from the fleet still thundered, but the guns along the Atlantic Wall were silent. The coast was looming larger, stretching out and dissolving in wreaths of haze and plumes of smoke drifting down from the bluffs. The stillness was immense—as in a pantomime of movement without sound—in the midst of sound. The world had become immediate and shrunken, gray dreams of grotesqueries.

Long bobbing lines of assault boats some veering off their course—as if lost—others sinking lower and lower—some disappearing beneath the waves—to our left, amphibious tanks, their canvas balloons flapping and foundering. Men wading slowly in the deck, some dead, floated gently. It seemed we were gliding now. The craft rose and fell with the swells—five hundred yards—four hundred yards, the guns of Omaha burst the silence.... A new fury of artillery shells and mortar fire swept against the boats—we were moving into this deadly hail—toward the thrashing surf beating over steel and concrete obstacles—poles of steel capped with mines.

The beach seemed a dead deserted land. No one moved upon it—the men in the boats were gray shadows listening to the sound of the craft as it butted the waves—heads low, hands gripping rifles, faces gray—everything was gone now but the body—like an animal, tensed, coiled.

Less than three hundred yards from the beach now—I could look directly ahead. There was a rising din in my ears. The boat had made a sickening lurch and seemed to float amidst a tangle of steel beams.

The diesels roared as it turned—and hung helplessly—impaled. Silhouettes of men huddled tensely along the deck—voices lost in the fury of wind and sounds. One voice clear—"The ramp is coming down! We can't move! You've got to swim for it!" The grating of chains—the steel cover, the square blunt nose of the boat was dropping, dropped a path into the open sea. There was a moment when the men seemed stunned, unmoving, automatically I fumbled with the tiny compressor, which would inflate my life belt. I wasn't sure it would work—I had never used it before—we had expected to wade from our boats and dash to the shore. Several men on the ramp—I walked forward, the ramp's edge was below the water. I just kept walking—until I plunged into the sea. This was deep water—I was heavy with equipment. The water filled my ears and nose. It was cold, dark, and silent below. I clutched at my rifle, should I let it go—to



free my hands? I felt the water, a shock of cold needles penetrating my clothing and seeping into my skin—a cool slow liquid—it was lifting and rocking me—slowly—I burst to the surface, my hand to my helmet. The heavy sea swells were pushing me. The sea was all around. Fifty, sixty yards ahead was the land. A worm's eye view—my body instinctively moved towards it. I thought of disengaging the strap tightening my shoulders—It had begun to hail machine gun fire skimming the water—a rapid firing of tiny pebbles splashing and zinging.

you made me understand that I had to tell your story, to write the book that you intended to write, and to be sure that the story which is yours, would be told.

On June 6, 1944, Ugo Giannini landed on Omaha Beach at H+70 minutes as one of a platoon of military police assigned to the 29th Division. Ugo's team was assigned the task of controlling the incoming traffic. There were thirty-seven men in his platoon; they were decimated in the first ten minutes. Six men got to the beach. Someone told Ugo that he was needed on the bluff above. He climbed the Vierville Draw, jumped into a crater made by naval bombardment, and spent that day and part of the next as an eyewitness to the greatest invasion ever conceived by the military. Remarkably, he began to draw. These are the only drawings made that historic day, as well as the next.

This book is the story of one man, in the context of World War II; a man who was a poet, an artist, and had the strength of a boxer. A civilian used to the comforts and hysteria of an immigrant Italian family. In love with Rene, his childhood sweetheart. Plunged into the hell of war.

The letters and the drawings that follow are from those days, June 6, 1944, to June 1945. The language is of that time, the drawings done on the spot, then.

It is through the eyes of this particular eyewitness that we can return to those terrible times, and begin to understand what it must have been like, for just one man to experience war. Perhaps through the individual narrative, we can understand the universal lesson of the brutality of war through the transformative experience that is unique to the infantry soldier—the man who fights the war on the ground.

Ugo's family consisted of Clara, his mother who was an opera singer; Antonio, a simple tailor, who sat cross-legged, in the old manner of Italian tailors; and his three brothers, Richard the eldest by ten years; Walter, a brilliant musician, composer, and the most nervous of the family; and the baby Harold, a strapping, direct, and simple man who worked laying linoleum floors in kitchens. Clara had eleven pregnancies. Four sons survived, and of the remaining pregnancies, one daughter lived only to die in infancy of diphtheria. The family was united by Clara and her wonderful cooking. One didn't want to miss those spaghetti dinners on Sunday or the all-out cooking of the Christmas holidays and Easter. Clara cooked almost every day of her married life, and she cooked for five hungry men. The aromas from the kitchen were astonishing. Ugo had never eaten or even seen peanut butter as a child. He didn't speak English until kindergarten. Walking into the Giannini house in East Orange, New Jersey, was to walk back in time to the medieval village of Serra Capriola in Italy. Life was hard. It was the depression, and the Gianninis moved fifteen times. When Ugo was eleven, he came home from school to find all the furniture in the

INTRODUCTION

By Maxine Giannini

Perhaps one would expect to really know and understand one's mate of thirty-seven years. What secrets, what silences could there be, after all that time? What hidden events, buried emotions, forbidden topics could be explored? What conversations were lost in the petty pursuit of daily life: the children, the house, the job, the friends, our families, the rush of the holidays, the struggle to survive? How was it possible not to know, and comprehend what happened to you, and to the men of the 29th Division. The chasm that existed between a war veteran and a civilian was enormous, the difference in age—you at twenty-five and in the war, and I, fifteen a teenager in high school—gave us completely different perspectives. Then there was the silence. The unspoken. You were not alone in your silence—it was as if there never had been a WWII, never a D-Day, never the loss of Division after Division, never a Holocaust, just that sweet, boring, mundane, conventional 1950s, '60s, '70s until '93, the year of your death. The world was eager to forget the upheaval and madness of WWII. Of Hitler, Mussolini, Emperor Hirohito, the bomb, Dresden, Auschwitz, we averted our eyes, and the veterans knew that they couldn't reveal what they had seen. A reality so horrific, that it had to be eradicated from one's consciousness, like a nightmare one tries to erase in the early morning light. You used to say to me that I was naïve; I didn't know what life was really like; here in the states, we all were living a dream, and there in Europe, you knew of the nightmare.

That's why you came back. I knew you were here—it was the morning after your funeral, February 3, 1993. I was sitting alone at about two a.m. in the living room, and I sensed your presence.... I know it sounds a little nuts, but you were here, and

ribbon. Ugo's mother had saved the correspondence. It was customary for the Giannini family to save letters of every description. Ugo retained all his correspondence from World War II. The written word was precious and documented the physical and emotional experiences. There was something more—Ugo had expressed a desire to become a writer; perhaps these letters would be valuable to him in the future.

Ugo and I met in 1951. I was twenty and he thirty. Mrs. Husserl, my piano teacher, mentor, confidant, and inspiration introduced us. Her home was a place that felt European, filled with music, books, sculptures. There were refugees arriving from Hitler's Germany, musicians, and intellectuals. There were wonderful conversations, almost a salon ambience. Mrs. Husserl took a personal interest in her students. She had a profound influence on me. She pointed the way professionally by having me teach music; she changed my destiny by introducing Ugo to me. He had returned from Paris after studying art with Fernand Léger. I didn't know of his war experiences, nor did I have any idea of the effect that the war had upon him. Battle fatigue was rarely discussed and post-traumatic stress disorder was unheard of.

Nor did I know of his love for Rene. After we knew each other for a while, we discussed his former girlfriend at length. It was such an unresolved and tangled affair. The aftermath left him spent and disillusioned. Something had happened between the family and Rene while he was in the service. They were convinced she wasn't the person Ugo perceived her to be. To Ugo's astonishment, he began to receive malicious mail from his mother, Evelyn (his sister-in-law), and Richard (his brother). A series of letters began between him and Rene. No single event could have a more devastating effect on him. The war, the separation, the bitter family interference were all so destructive that they couldn't survive as a couple. But in a tragic way, Ugo couldn't let go. I felt sorry for her and sorry for him.

The past was over, or was it? Ugo used to say to me, "What are you doing with me? An artist, unemployed." He didn't want to have children. "There is too much suffering to bring anyone else into this world."

I didn't want to continue our relationship without the hope of marriage and children. Ugo had decided marriage wasn't for him. I was young and unwilling to suffer. I loved him totally, but the complexity and ambivalence of our relationship was unbearable. I left for Europe for three months. I asked Ugo not to meet me when I returned. I was willing to sever our relationship. If however, he felt he was ready for a commitment to share our life, fine. Otherwise, I asked him to please let me go. We met at the boat in Hoboken. We married in 1955. Laura was born in 1957 and Mark in 1960. Ugo had a studio where he painted and gave some art classes. I taught piano. Somehow we survived. In 1965, Ugo became a professor at Caldwell

house repossessed. Only a chair and a small table remained. Clara cooked in an electric coffee pot, and made ersatz meatballs and spaghetti sauce for the family. There was no money for meat.

Ugo worked for the WPA (Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program that put millions of Americans to work during the Depression). He raked leaves and did maintenance work in the local parks. (Pa was unemployed.) He attended the National Academy of Design in New York and worked for a furniture company, illustrating catalogs. He showed enormous artistic talent at an early age and was encouraged by his high school teachers to attend art school. And Ugo was in love with Rene, his childhood sweetheart, his obsession. By the time Ugo was twenty-one in 1940, he had a job in advertising for Sears in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Life was taking on a routine and ordinary dimension. There was no way that he could have known that the world as he knew it was on the verge of changing completely, that he would be hurled into an unimaginable war in faraway lands and that his sense of reality would be destroyed forever. The Ugo who left for the war—after being drafted in 1942—would never return. The man who returned from the war was unrecognizable to Clara, and she said, "What have they done to my son?"

There was a huge disconnection between the civilian population in the United States and the men who fought the war—almost a conspiracy of silence. The news of the war was limited, and the letters from the GI's were censored—no mention of places, times, battles, or deaths were permitted. An unreality between what Ugo was experiencing and what he communicated in his correspondence became apparent. As Ugo tried to hold onto his memories of his family and Rene and freeze them in time, his family had no idea of the violence of war—of what terror and danger, what anguish, deprivation, and horror was the daily bread of their son. As Rex Potts, Ugo's sergeant said, "I didn't have the words. Besides, who cared?" This said fifty years after the war was over. The rupture between war and civilian life would be complete and endure for the rest of Ugo's life.

The mystery and secret world of war would create an abyss between soldiers and civilians. After the war, the veterans of the 29th Division returned to their families as strangers in a strange land. The not-so-subtle indoctrination into the military, the months of combat, the strain of being shot at, bombed, having their comrades killed on a daily basis tore at the foundation of everything they learned prior to being inducted into service. How to set all this aside and pretend that it didn't exist. The silence of the veterans was almost universal.

During the war Ugo's mother wrote to him in Italian; he answered her in English. In his closet in a neat stack, I found about thirty letters. They were tied with a blue

College in Caldwell, New Jersey. This was based on his studies at the Art Students' League in New York City and with Fernand Léger in Paris.

We bought a house in 1961. Ugo put his personal belongings in the basement, having been told by the previous owner that the basement was dry. The next week we had a major flood. Ugo was terribly upset and went about drying and restoring a ton of "stuff." The studio was one of the two master bedrooms in our house. After Ugo died, I found the letters. That "stuff" he dried was the complete correspondence between Ugo and Rene. When they had broken up, she returned all of his letters to her as well as all her letters to him.

I broke my hip in the summer of 1996. In August I began to read the correspondence. The letters are very beautiful and at the same time quite appalling. They express a torrent of emotions and truly document a period. They are a historical record of a WWII GI.

I'm not quoting the entire letters. The extremely personal I'm omitting, and I am not using the actual name of the former girlfriend. The letters reveal the effect of WWII on one soul, from D-Day to VE-Day and beyond and not only the physical and spiritual duress, but also the epiphany. Many times Ugo told me he knew how things really were. He knew the truth of existence. Had Ugo's family understood what Ugo was enduring, they would have refrained from their negative letters. Had Rene understood, she might have been less demanding. As it happened, the war brought out destructive emotions, all in the name of love.

Walter, Ugo's older brother, gave me a group of letters in 1997. These letters date from 1942 to 1945. These two brothers were closest in philosophy than other members of the family. Ugo was also very protective of Walter—a kind of role reversal. Walter was "high strung," emotional. He seemed to rely on Ugo for strength and steadiness. Harold, the baby, was in the war. They subsequently met in Germany.

I believe these letters are a testament of what it was to endure WWII as an infantryman, and I believe that Ugo would want to share his story with the world, lest we forget.

1. Rene is not the correct name of Ugo's sweetheart. I changed the name to protect her privacy in the event that she is still living.

Chapter One

JUNE 1944: H-HOUR

AGONY AT VIERVILLE

The drawing *D-Day, H-Hour+70, Vierville-sur-Mer* depicts the first moments of landing. A self-portrait: helmet still on his head, the yin and yang sign of the 29th Division showing through the water on Ugo's sleeve and helmet, rifle clutched, terror on his face, his buddy hit on his right side, then another on his left, equipment floating, next to the German Obstacle with the Teller mine. The German General Rommel had the beaches fortified with thousands of these obstacles for just such an event.

In 1997, I contacted two of the members of the MP special platoon, Rex Potts and Dom Russo, who landed with Ugo. Rex, by that time an old man, wept when he heard my voice. He was Ugo's sergeant. He told me that he had never discussed the war with anyone—not his sons, not his wife. When he returned home he thought *who would be interested?* It was a terrible strain for him to speak with me—fifty years after June 6, 1944. He said of the thirty-seven men on the boat that only six were alive after the first ten minutes. He had dashed to the right, while Ugo had gone to the left. When did they meet again? I don't know. Dom Russo told me Ugo was his best man at his wedding. I didn't know that. But why would I? I was twelve years old when the war began. Dom was in another landing craft, on a special mission to Le Percée. The mayor had been in contact with the American forces. Dom and four others rushed to Le Percée in order to save the mayor, but it was in vain. The collaborators had hanged him in the square. Dom said that Ugo was close to the headquarters of General Gerhardt (the Commanding General of the 29th Division) most of the time, and that he did artwork for the 29th, including traffic signs. Ugo had never talked about this.

DRAWING D-DAY

In 1944 there were no old men with aching memories, only the immediate experience. Ugo jumped into the water and got to shore. Someone came to him and said an MP was needed on top of the bluff. When he climbed the hill he found himself completely alone. He jumped into a bomb crater, where he began to draw the battle scene as it unfolded before him.



Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944

JUNE 1944: H-HOUR



D-Day, June 6, 1944



Doc Green, the MP Combat Team, was scheduled to land during the operation of the underwater team while breaching paths through mines and underwater obstacles. This sketch depicts the beach and obstacle moments before landing.

D-Day Plus 2

[June 7, 1944]

I retraced my way from the battered remains of Vierville-sur-Mer. I walked slowly, dragging my unwilling soul with me and forcing it to inhale the death odor.

I was alone, searching for my comrades—37 men who were hurled ashore yesterday morning. (Or was it years ago?)

I walked, stopped, resumed again always against the visible signs of war. Which way did it go?—I reached the first enemy machine gun emplacement. Leaned heavily against its sand bags. They were vomiting their white dusty guts—It was still—very still—but I heard the war crashing, exploding in my ears, my nose, and my mouth. I drew from a smashed wet pack of cigarettes—the bitter nicotine tasted sweet—I inhaled thick quantities of smoke like vaporous balls of opaque cotton—I wanted to forget, to stop thinking or feeling—I wanted to rest or to die—a thin plaster of white mud, darker brown where it was still wet, painted my legs, my boots, my hands and—yes—it must have been inside me too, in my stomach and along—



D-Day + 2: looking out to Pont Du Hoc. Coming down the bluff, only bodies piled as far as he could see.

They have sent me - their hacked bodies
 are limb less; maggots feed on their tongues
 - In their gaping mouths
 - In their hollow eyes Death feeds!
 They have sent me - to tell you that Death feeds
 on them - whom you loved!
 They want to tell you - - - - they forgive you
 They sent me thus - one of them and pieces of all of them
 And the strength of their forgiveness Giving me life - to tell you this.
 They said "We forgive you" - - - - - and then they died
 From them - - - - - I picked myself up
 Out of them - - I singled
 Limbs, arms, feet, body and head
 I stood naked on the beach
 And I was no one - - but I was all.
 They have sent me - and I have
 Found you - - to tell you
 They forgive you - - - - -

Upon returning to the scene of Omaha D + 2

Day has passed, and half the night
 Still I linger here, on this rock - - - - -
 Below the seething sea sings and bright
 Demons dance where a burning moon
 Sinks its silver substance into the sea
 "One step forward and below
 the wind" There lies eternity

June 14, 1944

My own,

There are a few things a diary could contain that I do not insert in my letter to you.—These things will be with me in a part of my memory I wish to destroy—I will not talk of them, since the idea of their existence—even now is unreal with horror—so do not ask for a description that I labor to wipe from my mind.

June 22, 1944

My Dearest,

I've been in France already [deleted by censor] and for more than one month previous to leaving England I've received no word of you.—I only hope that this delay in mail is due to the postal difficulties—I dare not think that you may be indisposed to writing.

I myself have been unable to correspond and because of this I feel a sudden drop, as tho' writing letters has become a thing of the past.

There are hardships that must be endured, this you know. And I won't say any words that can fitly describe—nor do I wish to, these circumstances. Only now more than at any time before I spend time consuming every little memory of you.

June 28, 1944

Dearest,

Your letter of May 23 arrived today, your first since my arrival in France—It is not a letter; it is a voice, warmly human, it is a great calm descending upon the storm—it is for me, a moment reborn from some lost eternity. It is you—the fierce throbbing concept breathing light and joy and reason, where there is only madness. Oh but I must check my pen—for it would describe a circle wherein is caged the beast of war.

Together, we left England on June 6, and you were with me, in the water, on the beach and through the days and nights—that followed. There were others like me, only they are still forever! And their beloveds wait for words that will not come—Did they not wish some last word to be heard from their blanched lips? Who was there to see and feel their pain? Where was the help they so needed when with their body and shocked brain they lay there, drenched, overcome and dying!—and could you know, would you know that I exposed, felt the presence of a strange lure—it was there that the living and dying all for that terrible hour knew the ugliness of death—and this, note, it was not fear that prevailed, but a resigned waiting for the moment that would leave one crushed and limp. There would not be escape—but there was at least till today.—Yes you are here, your name is the only prayer I ever knew—so believe, accept my spirit—and be conscious that it is much more than love between us—it is, and you know, one soul living in two bodies.

Before I forget—please send me as much candy as you can get, this I can distribute among the ragged children. The state of life here is by far worse than that of England.

The retreating Germans loot each farmhouse of its cows and blankets and the people are left homeless and hungry. It is common to see a family carrying its only possessions on their backs. They all wear

wooden shoes—I managed to buy a pair, I'm sending home. I always had a fancy for them.

The Germans have been told that if they surrender to us, we would shoot them. So they fight fanatically to the last.

I'm beginning to grasp a bit of French—this breaks the monotony—send me also a French phrase book. (PS)

Goodnight and write real soon

Forever

June 28, 1944

Dear Walt!

I suppose you have only to read the newspapers and you will know where I am and how I'm doing.

Frankly—I've just about had all I ever want of this—I think sometimes how you would react if you were in the Service. I'm certainly a far cry from the person I used to be—someday I'll gain myself, the peace that has been lost for more than two years. I don't know where Harold (1) is yet.—I hope he remains in England a while longer.

Received a letter and a V-Mail from you. Thanks. Send my best to Jo(2) and love to all.

Sincerest memories.

I remain,

Ugo

June 1944

THE WAVE

I grieve now—to behold its ebbing
slipping, washing back, rushing,
—me leaving—forever leaving

I stand now—marooned on the ledge

Hopeless, powerless, voiceless while the sedge forms, twists,
thickens, clings to the edge

The sedge rooting itself, sperm-like growing

Over the ledge, gathers itself, flinging slime or tears on me, now
overflowing I feel now—in the eternity of a moment

The remembered ecstasy of yesterday

The dying despair of today The forward surge The washing back
of me spending and being spent

Chapter Two

JULY 1944: REQUIEM ST-LO

NORMANDY, FRANCE

In July the 29th Division was engaged in fierce fighting; the objective St-Lo. There was a stalemate, and the American forces were unable to push forward. The Generals, Omar Bradley and Eisenhower, were frustrated and devised a plan called Operation Cobra. The 29th Division was scheduled to head the attack; they were opposed by crack German troops. The strongest of the German ground forces were the Paratroops. General Eisenhower stated: "With an authorized force of 16,000 men and a larger allotment of machine guns than the normal infantry divisions, the parachute troops were the best of the Germans for stout resistance on an extended open front." The 29th had been in continuous battle since the June landing, and were by then battle-hardened troops. St-Lo occupied a critically important position and had to be taken at all costs. The costs ended up being extreme; the Germans lost 97,000 men in three weeks, averaging 2,000 to 3,000 daily. (*The Long Line of Splendor, 1742-1992*).

The portrait entitled *Memories of St. Lo* catches the psychological impact of war. The young American civilian has been transformed into a battle-weary "Old Man." Men coming into the 29th as replacements, who had not experienced battle, recognized the veterans with their vacant stare, their lack of enthusiasm, and their quietness. How long did it take to become an "Old Man"? From June 6, 1944, to July 18, 1944, or from D-Day until the fall of St. Lo, the men of the 29th served continuously. In June, 4,686 of their men were killed, wounded, or missing in action—another 4,448 in July. Was that enough? More than half of a division? Ugo stated in a letter of July 9, 1944: "To those at home the war is a gradually deepening form on the surface of a map, but to those of us here—there is no miracle but the price is paid."

1. Harold, the youngest of the four brothers, was stationed in England with a top secret division, which was designed to deceive Hitler's High Command into thinking the main invasion was to occur at the Pas-de-Calais, the nearest French town to England.

2. Jo, Walter's first wife.



Memories of St. Lo,
an old man of war

"On the 18th of July, 1944, The Commanding Officer, Capt. Vern E Johnson, and 15 enlisted men, attached to special Task Force Charlie, took part in the capture of, and occupation of St. Lo. This detachment remained in St. Lo for a period of three days, leaving on July 20, when Division moved into rest area." Vern E. Johnson was the C.O. of the Military Police platoon. He survived the war and in the 1980s contacted Ugo. Task Force Charlie (1) was a motorized, heavily armored force, which occupied St. Lo after severe house-to-house combat.

1. "Charlie" is the army designation, used in the transmission of messages for the letter "C"; in this instance "C" denoted Brigadier General Norman D. Coia, commander of the task force. (Maryland in World War II, 1950)

July 3, 1944

Dearest,

Just received your long delayed package. It took two months in arriving—but at a most opportune time—everything in it I need except of course the cigarettes.

—Say that chicken was it! I made a hot soup and added a bit of pepper: You can never quite imagine how good it was. I confess, I barely realize the primitive tenor of this existence.

In fact, comforts are a strange, thing, which one can do very nicely without. I could expand a bit on how we live here but I'm sure you would accuse me of deserving sympathy—ha! ha!

However foot powder is a fine thing to have, especially when one doesn't have the benefits of a bath or one hasn't removed socks or shoes for almost a month.

Say—How about dropping a few more letters in the box this week? It gets very lonely here you know:

Until later

Goodnight

As ever yours

July 5, 1944

Dearest,

Thinking as I am, and toying with so diversified a selection of subjects I feel prompted to give order and shape, despite time and fate's skeptical attitude towards fulfillment.

You and I both, are living and have lived since our separation on the hope, that is almost knowledge, that we shall once more and for time

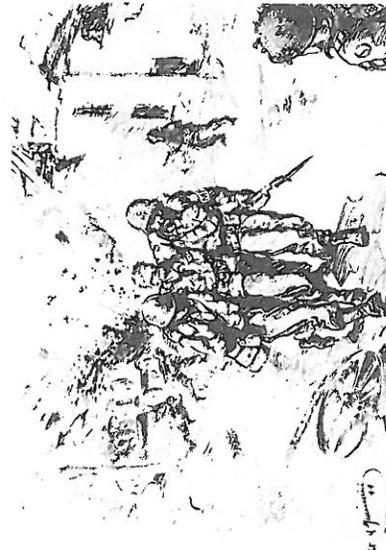
to come, meet and prolong that reunion for, in fact, to the ends of our destinies. I feel positive that the scheme of things for us is only an embryo and the tomorrow is designed to outweigh with its bright hopes all the sadness and horror of the past....

There is another phase I meant to speak of—namely that, for more than two years I have struggled to keep from floundering in the cesspool of this mob-existence or mobile concentration camp. It has not been easy—devoid of intellectual pursuits—devoid of culture and the things—to me which were life, to keep from sinking below the level of decency and to avoid the vast vacuum which would absorb all individual thought.

The best of me then, or at least, what you knew of me can be found only in these notes to you. This may account for that peculiar "reserve"—I guard with increasing vigil the scattered leaves of yesteryear, and patiently day and night I gather them close—I have then the collector's priceless jewels.

Do I sound detached from the idea of war? But why should I burden you with the fury of its sound and sight? I shudder at the impulse that would plant in your mind a vivid portrayal of it.

Operation Cobra,
St. Lo, July 18, 1944



If you would have the news—I can brief its highlights for you. Our outfit received the presidential citation (big deal!) This far the initial assault on that gray day—more news? Sorry but it's "Verboten" ha! ha!

July 7, 1944

Dearest,

I admit my patience is turning sour on me. I receive far too little correspondence from you. And if it pleases you to make me happy you will look into this sad matter—I'm trying desperately to understand and project myself in your place—but I fail to reason why you allow days to slip by and with them the word I wait for day by day. It angers me to think that my mail appears always reluctant to come.

Everyone is receiving mail quite regularly again—but me! Am I indeed forgotten? The last I heard from you was May and here it is July 7.

Please overlook this complaint if you know that I shall soon be rewarded with letters that have gone unfortunately astray....

Somewhere in France

July 9, 1944

Dear Wait!

Oh! I have not written to you at an earlier date, rarely have I forgotten you. I was content with idea that the recent letters I dispatched home have somehow passed on to you. Letters received from home indicate that no one imagined I was ever to leave England on the business of war. This I observed with a mixture of gratitude and surprise. Perhaps it is best you remain ignorant of my circumstances. There can be nothing gained in the telling of them. I'm sure my life here would intrude violently upon your

own. The difference is so great! My sole complaint, and I honestly believe it not to be insistent, is that letters for me arrive rarely and far between. I am deeply concerned for Harold, and yet I hear nothing from him nor do I have his address.

The only consolation is a very strong presentiment that suggests this year as being decisive to the end. And if this is not to be fulfilled, at least I'm happiest in believing that it will.

To those at home the war is a gradually deepening front on the surface of a map—but to those of us here, there is no miracle but that the price is paid. Contemplating the thought that someday this madness will be a thing of the past is a strange thought, for in the memory of some it will never die—and I confess, personally, I view with a feeling of uncertainty that civilian life can ever be a returning. Too much has happened to ignore its influence on the future. And I do not understand the ceremony of drums and flags and parades as indicative of anything but a horrible rejoicing where there should be mourning instead.

—I'm glad you realize the folly of struggling to achieve. It is best to work unconscious of the word success—herein lies achievement. Every hour, every day can be an attainment measured only by the happiness resolved from it. Life is not so long that we can afford to ignore its simple pleasures.

How is Joann? And are you happy in your studio? Please send me a more informative letter, even if it suggests gossip. I'm dying to know about the many little things and the people I used to know.

Just received a most snivory package from home and a letter from you—this most encouraging—tho' in all modesty I am feeling quite confident.

"Now then," as old MacMurray used to say: "All for the interest of science!"

As ever,

Ugo



29th Division, St. Lo Sector, prisoners of war, St. Lo 4 km.

29th DIV. ST. LO. SECTOR
Prisoners of War

July 27, 1944

My Dearest,

Have you forgotten me? Then why do you not write? I live in vain for your letters—but they do not come, to bring me either joy or sadness.

Since landing—I have received two letters, one dated as far back as May 23rd and the latest one dated July 1st. This one I am grieved to say I lost, tho' I have the picture of you in my wallet.

I have not been writing of late except to the folks—reason of which I will not discuss.

Perhaps you are ill? I pray not. I am much too tired to stress the urgency with which I need word from you—However if you insist on silence,

I am not responsible for my misery of mind and heart, and I can no longer control a despair that has left me to think and feel only the emptiness—the damnable darkness of existence.

All my faith, all my hope I placed in you, and you do not respond. I wish you to know that I will not forget this, and you will remember these fifty days of silence. You are growing away from me—do you know?

Are you happiest in forgetting? Only let me know.

Goodnight and may you have the kindness to write, at least once a month.

Chapter Three

AUGUST 1944: HEDGEROW COUNTRY

VIRE, FRANCE

On August of 1944, the 29th Division began the pursuit of the German Army through Normandy. The Germans intended to fight a delaying action through the Hedgerow country. The roads were mined; trip wires were placed at field entrances; tanks and self-propelled guns were used in order to slow the Americans. (29 *Let's Go*) There was no sleep—the 29ers were continually harassed by machine guns.

On August 1, 1944, Tessy-sur-Vire fell. Vire was the city Eisenhower said was the pivotal point on which the American Army would swing. The hedgerows were dense, ancient barriers, hundreds of years old, which made each field a killing ground. The Germans utilized these natural barriers as ideal cover for machine guns, as well as mines and booby traps. Vire had been under continual artillery fire, as well as being bombarded by American bombers on D-Day. Leaflets had been dropped over the city warning the civilians of the bombing, but had landed in a nearby forest. One leaflet was brought to the French official, who was a collaborator with the Germans. He chose not to inform the citizens of Vire. When the people of Vire saw the American planes they hailed them, even though hundreds were killed by their bombardment. Ugo was astonished at the French villagers who welcomed the Americans with open arms, even though their cities had been leveled to the ground.

Vire is on high ground bounded by the Vire River and with three hills west and south of the river. Hill #219 was captured and cleared by the 116th Regiment, 3rd Battalion, on August 5, 1944. Robert Grande of the 115th described it this way:

We had met slight opposition but it wasn't anything that would hold up for more than thirty minutes. Our two squad platoon had just finished clearing a farmhouse and was ready to take off for the next hedgerow. When all Hell broke loose. We got two feet beyond our hedgerow, Pvt. J Foley, asst. squad leader was the first one to get it—right between the eyes. I saw his knees buckle under him. Sgt. Potter, leader of the 1st squad, Weaver and Sparks were pinned down before they could get over the hedgerow. The 1st Platoon on the left, was also pinned down, so we twelve men reached the next hedgerow with our left flank exposed to machine-gun fire and sniper fire.

We had no sooner reached the next hedgerow when we realized that we were being picked off, one by one. We shifted our fire from the direct front to the left flank. I saw Weaver bring his rifle to his shoulder, but he didn't quite make it, and a Jerry bullet got him. Sgt. Afanasewicz, 1st Squad leader, was fifteen yards down the hedgerow with a BAR. (Browning Automatic Rifle.) American infantrymen cherished the BAR. It was a hybrid designed to have the portability of a rifle, but the firepower of a machine gun. Every twelve-man rifle squad had a single BAR. (Beyond the Beachhead, J. Balkoski, p. 84). He was on his last magazine so he called to Young for some more ammo. Before Young could reach him he saw, and so did I, the smoke from the bullet that got Afanasewicz directly between the eyes. Young then began crawling back to me. He was pretty excited, and said that everyone had gotten killed except the two of us, which was quite true.

I was about to tell him to lie down and play dead when a burst of machine-gun fire got him in his gut. He fell by my side, and I pulled him closer to the hedgerow and told him to be still. He called for a medic a couple of times before he realized that it was impossible for a medic or anyone else to reach us. I told him to start praying, which was what I had been doing since I hit the hedgerow. I told him that we'd have to play dead until the darkness came, and that was eight hours to go. I was in such a position that my legs began to get numb, but I was scared to move.

Young became conscious again and told me that he was going to die. I made believe I was mad as hell at him, and told him that a good Texan never dies. That brought a weak grin from him and he went back into another state of unconsciousness.

Just before dark I saw Private Tregembo, who was five yards or so away from me, began to stir. I whispered to him and he turned his head to me. I crawled over to him and he pointed to his legs. I nodded and whispered to him to take off all his equipment. As soon as both of us had done that I started to drag him as best I could. When we had gotten about fourteen yards from the hedgerow I suggested a rest. His legs were paining him too much so I told him to crawl as best he could while I tried to go back for a stretcher.

I was about twelve feet from our hedgerow when a guard halted me. I told him who I was and he told me to advance with my hands over my head. I did so and he let me come through. He took me up to the company CP and there Lieutenant Gentry sent two men to pick up Tregembo. Young was dead. (With permission from J.H.Ewing, 29 Let's Go)

The 29th battle line had moved 5,000 yards by August 15. The Division's combat came to a quiet conclusion by August 16. Orders were now received to prepare for the move to Brittany.

The war in Normandy was over.

For every new location, for every new battle, the 29th trained, reorganized, and analyzed prior battles. The German Army in France was an experienced, highly trained force, who were the invaders and committed to holding their ground. They were unprepared for the tough, brave, and intelligent American soldiers. They were sure the GIs would have neither the stamina nor the pure courage that they eventually encountered. It was not superiority of arms that won the war. It was the resourcefulness and determination of the individual, and the cohesiveness of the Division that prevailed. Because the Germans had invaded France, the French did not consider the allies invaders; they were liberators and were hailed as such throughout Normandy with gifts, flowers, and kisses. Even for the fiftieth anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, the French welcomed the returning American veterans as liberators.

Portrait



August 1, 1944

My Own Dearest,

For the first time in my life I feel as I have never felt before—your letters of July 17, 18, 19 arrived.

Now listen to me, and closely, and remember that I love you with the capacity of this and other worlds. I know the meaning of life and death—believe me! This is why you must abide by what I say. Here it is—There is hope only in life;—only in life will we, can we be together, after that there is nothing—nothing! Do you understand? Forget what I have said in the past that speaks of other existences. There is only one for us, the thread of which has been temporarily severed, but which every day brings us closer to its repair—that we will continue from

there—that we will live again. Look in the mirror. See yourself! And say—“Gogo wishes me to know that I must prepare for his return. (And if he does not return, he begs me to realize that his life is not the beginning nor the end of all things for me.) Tho’ I feel it is and I weep and am ill for his safety. He has told me in his own words and his voice was so sure, so clear, almost angry.... I shall be not to death, but to life devoted, for he is the symbol of life.”

All these weeks without word from you—but I knew you couldn’t write; that you are ill, yes I am with sick mind conscious of how helpless I am to you.—and you have been ill since I left what can I do? But say that I feel that this year I’ll be home....

By every mail I live only for word from you.

August 2, 1944

My Dearest,

Hoping you are receiving plenty of fresh air and sun. And please do not take too seriously my complaint that you are not writing. I know it is quite a task to write when one is ill. I should have known you were not well; perhaps I did, and this I hated to reveal to myself. However, I want you to keep me posted as to your health. Please don’t try and conceal from me your welfare—what other interest is there for me? I will take it that you are too ill to write—meanwhile my feelings remain now and forever unchanged for you.

I am anxious to learn that you have rested and will continue to do so. How I long to be there beside you. Yet I am grateful that after these two months I can still send letters. There are others who will not write again....

I have letters I wrote to you—but I’m a hard censor—so they remain unmailed—at least their contents I can well remember and someday—soon—I shall be delighted to tell you personally of all that has occurred

since I left you. Let's just take another breath, grit your teeth and hold on tomorrow is on its way!

I must tell you how sweet your last picture was. I have it here in my wallet—but whose hand is that resting on your shoulder? Or who is the character you blocked out? Someone I don't know? Don't mind, guess I'm jealous! Ha! Ha! as I've always been of any one near you.

Saw my first cinema here in France last week. In an old barn. "Cover Girl," I thought the sight of many lovelies rather breathtaking. I took a fancy to that song throughout—Will you purchase some of the songs I've missed?—records of course....

I pray this letter finds you better in health of mind and body and until—next time
My life I love you.

Gogo

August 10, 1944

Dear Heart,
Although there are hours designated to sleep—there are rude and violent intrusions. The series of which, over so prolonged a period have left their mark—happily enough invisible to the eye, and in the course of time will heal. I am speaking of wounds that bring pain greater than mere physical ruptures. For when the heart is ill, the body is indeed insignificant. What has long since become unbearable I now endure unconsciously, as tho' and indeed existing in this strange half-world.

The entire horror of all has been, and this I confess without shame, augmented by the knowledge that you have grown seriously ill. I had prepared long ago—even for death—but nothing can still my heart against this fierce tide of consuming grief for you. All my life I converge on your

spirit—all of my reason to live—all my hope to happiness, all my dreams, all the beauty, however transient—all my concept of immortality—all revolves about you—and now you are ill—and from your concealing description, for you do not wish me to know, you do not believe in adding to my burdens here, I have drawn my own image—you have been silent—but that silence has spoken to me gravely and with clear voice....

August 1944

Dear,

Your letter of Aug. 17, arrived today—I pored over its content many times and allowed its tones to vibrate through a part of me that has long since died. I wept inwardly, for your message is a tangible proof that those hours we consumed are not mere memory.

—This I know and only this—two feet in front of me is my mirrored self, a steel helmet that holds sweat and mental pain—a shoulder that says: leather and steel on flesh—a back that bears a brown hump and a waist that is manacled with bits of pointed death. Below is the light khaki—growing dark with sweat: and the two eternal pendulums dragging studded boots over a road that will not end.

August 14, 1944

Last night I shall never forget. I shall remind you with thunder in my eyes and manner that you have failed me.

Last night I was ill—as you welled up—and in the fever of my mind I resolved to compose this last letter whose urgency is greater than any I have yet written. It is not I—it is you who have failed to absorb the sincerity in my previous letters. ... but to you they are only letters. Lovelorn, mushy and casual—They remain pasted in your scrapbook—mocking your—own senses.



A soldier on the front line.

Here they are, three of the most unlovely letters ever written arriving in order, Aug. 7, 8, and 10. One who loves me and has faith in me does not write such stinging lines. How can I be blunt yet tender? How can your poor little intellect grasp the idea that tho' I love you more than life I still must teach you what a fool you are?

Living with me for so many years I am chagrined that the many times you agreed with my chain of thoughts—now that I have gone—has been in vain. There is no end to my anger and disillusionment—How dare you insult my intelligence? My right to manhood? I resent fiercely your implications that I'm having a "good time with the Mademoiselles." Little fool! At the front there is only death and horror—no Mademoiselles! Christ how faithless you are!

August 29, 1944

I don't believe a word of this however—so it's quite hopeless to make me mad—besides if you didn't care I should never express so glibly my

personal thoughts. On this 29th day of Aug.... I celebrate by myself the thought that I am still alive—there are indeed few who can say "I am a veteran of the 29th Div." All who have not been killed but wounded have returned into action indestructible until they die, as indeed only two remain in my old outfit.

I must feel indeed queer, like a ghost who does not know. Since the first hour of D-Day when I dragged myself like a wet rat ashore—ha! I lead a charmed life—but when will that charm be lost?

August 30, 1944

[on American Red Cross letterhead]

[Rene,]

Don't get upset! It's the only paper available! Hello there! What's it like in E O? ... I wonder if all the kids will be grown up when I return, and why? As for me I manage to keep that schoolboy complexion—yup! I never want to be a man—They're funny people with funny ideas. I'd



Fallen Hero.

be satisfied just taking you to a good movie and holding hands in the dark. Yup! You know ice cream, and some candy (licorice drops) and maybe peanuts with the shell—In fact I've got a lot of surprises for you when I get back—just wait.... Surprises yes but not just things—I mean we're going to make up every day of the war since I left. Is it two years or twenty years? I'm not saying how worried I am for you—but please keep well, that's an order!

Do you still listen to "Just Music"? I haven't forgotten the theme—it's got a funny sound. When I hear it I almost repicture those many nights, a dark sweet scented room, a chair, a candle glow from the radio. That's real to me! This isn't now. All those pledges, those looks, your sad eyes catching the quiet light. They are not gone are they? They will return? I'm almost afraid so much happiness isn't meant to be. Well goodnight and don't forget, my life, I love you.

Gogo

