LOOKING BACK AT D-DAY

RESIDENT REMEMBERS INVASION OF NORMANDY

By Lisa Gallagher Fletcher
Staff Writer

John McBain scrolls through his old, ragged scrapbook reminiscing about the fighting, heartache and luck he encountered on D-Day.

"None of us knew what we were getting into, but we had a feeling some wouldn't make it back," said the 75-year-old Kettering resident referring to the Normandy invasion which occurred 50 years ago this Monday.

McBain, who served as a surgical technician with the 96th Evacuation Unit, assisted doctors with wounded soldiers as bombs and shells surrounded them on the beach.

"I was taking care of the first eight men on the line as soon as they were hit," he said.

Five beach areas called Gold, Sword, Juno, Omaha, and Utah were being invaded heavily by the Germans. Soon, the fighting reached a point where the men had to retreat.

"We were given the command to start up the mountain as the firing continued because there was no safe place to set up camp," McBain said.

By the end of the day, more than 2,500 men were killed. Casualities covered each beach. Some beaches had more than others. Utah Beach wasn't as heavily invaded as nearby Omaha Beach, which was called a "blood bath" by many historians.

"We were very lucky that our beach wasn't as heavily bombarded, but still a lot of people died. More than we could ever wrap our heads around," McBain said, remembering the scene on the beach that fateful day.

McBain and the medical camp followed his unit until the Germans surrendered on May 7, 1945. As the men moved forward, so would he.

The units would stay in one place no more than four days before it was time to move again.

"There were times when I had just dug a fox hold to hide in and it would be time to move," he said. "It took me a whole day to dig one of those awful holes."

McBain remembers when he reached Normandy he was lucky enough to find a fox hole already dug. "The holes were deep enough to offer safe haven for the rest of the day and night," he said.

However, McBain knew at any time he would have to jump out of his hole to help save lives. "No less then 20 minutes after a man was hit, he'd be on our table," he said. "There were times when there was a backup of casualties waiting to be operated on, but the more serious went first."

Despite the medical team's efforts, many of the men who fought in McBain's troop didn't make it home from the war.

"Some of the men lost their dog tags in the bombings and we had no idea who they were. We would have to write 'unknown' on the grave. It was terribly sad."

Finally, after 11 months the bombs ceased, and the cries of pain ended. McBain left on a boat headed for the US two months after the Germans surrendered. His unit received five bronze starts for their effort.

"It was great to be able to go back on the boat with bright lights, McBain said. "It was nice not to have to hide anymore. All I wanted to do was get back to Cleveland to see my wife and son," he said.

Today McBain has five children, 11 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren and lives with his wife Gerri in Kettering. He still tells his family stories about this impactful time in his past.

"I used to tell my children stories of the war so they could get to understand me better. They told me I should write a book. Maybe someday I will."