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Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

WW II Seabee Recalls Omaha Beach on D-Day Plus 1

Editor's Note: Gerald E. Smith is a retired English and humanities high school teacher, living in Park Forest, Ill.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--What was it like on Omaha Beach on the second day of the Normandy invasion to liberate Europe from the Nazis? Just ask Gerald E. Smith, he was there as a Seabee with a Navy construction battalion.

"It was an absolute mess," Smith recalled, "and it was scary. We went in on an LCI--Landing Craft Infantry. We were 600-800 yards from the shore, stuck on a sand bar . . . Soldiers on the LCI to the left were getting into the water. It was horrible. They stepped off the LCI with their gear and drowned. They were too heavy to swim."

Eventually, Smith and upwards of 500 others trudged through shoulder-deep water carrying ammunition, guns and gas masks above their heads to the beach.

Smith's wartime experiences are recounted in the Fall, 1995, edition of *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine* in an article, "A Change in Plans: IWU and the War," marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. The article, written by Bob Aaron, IWU's director of public relations, is attached to this news release.

Smith returned to Normandy's beaches in 1994, a half-century after the invasion.

"It was eerie and disappointing," he said. "Although we walked through the cemetery, we tried desperately to find something identifiable from our memories, but the beach is a resort and people were sunbathing."

Smith is a 1950 IWU graduate.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls 1,860 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. The university's endowment is valued at more than \$100 million. A \$25 million Center for Natural Science Learning and Research opened Aug. 28. A

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Omaha Beach Remembered/2

\$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 164 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition. *101 of the Best Values in America's Colleges and Universities* calls IWU "undoubtedly one of the finest small colleges in the country," adding, "Illinois Wesleyan has surged to national prominence on the basis of its reputation as a school with a rock-solid academic program."